THE PRESS AND PLANNING

by

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INTRODUCTION.

A Guardian editorial in October, 1974, lamented the problems of high rise living but concluded that the experience will have done some good '.... if it makes the next generation of town planners less arrogant than the last'.

'The planners' are notorious. Best known for their 'blight' (infectious), they have become one of society's scapegoat groups to whom nearly all our environmental ills may be charged - ugly buildings, traffic congestion and the disappearance of the local shop. Who are these planners? The Guardian may have meant to include all local authority members, officials, government ministers, civil servants and others who used tower blocks as an easy solution to the problem of rehousing quickly and at high density. If, as is more likely, the paper was referring only to the teams of local authority employees operating within the statutory constraints of the Town and Country Planning Acts then the imputation, in this context at least, is unfair. It is a distinction that is seldom drawn.

This dissertation is not an apologia for the planner against press misrepresentation. Nor is it essentially concerned with the value of the press to planners, and with the use that they can make of it. Rather it looks at the attention paid by newspapers to local environmental problems and proposals, and at their relationship with local government and community organisations. It asks what contribution does and can the non-specialist press make

to the quality of political and planning debate at the local level.

Two London-based case studies consider the role of Fleet Street in the controversy surrounding the future of Piccadilly Circus, and the 1974 planning coverage of a suburban weekly.

CHAPTER 1. PLANNING AND JOURNALISM.

How newsworthy is planning? Like any other business a newspaper must sell to survive and sales are largely determined by the quality and presentation of its news[1]. According to one definition 'news is what newspapermen make it' (Gieber, 1964) and the implications of this are discussed below. An alternative approach is to ask what people want from their newspapers. Park (1940) claims that all writers are faced with a dilemma: 'the things which most of us would like to publish are not the things most of us want to read. We may be eager to get into print what is, or seems to be edifying, but we want to read what is interesting'.

Accordingly, a newspaper must both inform (the characteristic of the 'quality' papers) and entertain (the emphasis of the 'popular' press). It is important that news should relate to the reader - 'things that one fears and that one hopes for ... births and deaths, weddings and funerals, the condition of the crops and of business, war, politics and the weather. These are the expected things but they are at the same time the unpredictable things' (Park, 1940). This need to relate means that there is a tendency for news to be personalised.

A. IS PLANNING 'NEWS'?

Klein (1973) writes that most newspapers assume that the readers of the City pages or of the football reports are

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1 'The imperatives of the newspaper are clear, It will find itself seeking to maximise advertising at the same time as it seeks to provide 'news' which will ensure constant or growing sales, in turn to ensure its advertising income'.
Cox and Morgan, 1973)

actually interested in the subject; '.... however all this tends to change when it comes to politics,' and this is particularly the case with statutory planning activity. Plans and planning are of little or no interest to most people, unless their lives or those of friends will be affected. This means that only occasionally will planning merit more than a passing reference in the popular press[2]. While much politics is enlivened by being presented in terms of political personalities, few politicians in this country have chosen to project their public image through planning. One man who did do this with success was Dan Smith, who as leader of the Newcastle labour group in 1961 was responsible for appointing Britain's first departmental city planning officer. His articulated vision of a new multi-level city, to be the 'Brazilia of the Old World', was central to his political performance.

A second constraint is the slow evolution of much planning activity. On the basis of previous experience both press and public may doubt the relevance of broader local authority planning to what actually happens. The daily, and weekly paper will always find difficulty in reporting an event which takes place over a long period. For example, it was many years before the large scale redevelopment of Victorian housing in inner city areas attracted the attention of the press. Cox and Morgan (1973) comment:

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2 The People (3.11.74) made a rare allusion to development control in a story concerning a farmer in Northamptonshire who had been required as a condition of planning consent to put cow dung on the roof of his farm building.

> "In the case of planning and redevelopment, the normal functioning of well-oiled and satisfactory procedures can at best be accorded an account of the intentions, beginning, and conclusion stages of a scheme, with perhaps the occasional interim report or photograph. This for something that may shape the face and future of an area in a substantial way. One single complaint by the residents affected or by traders losing business as a result of population change may receive as much treatment. Planning officials and committees might well feel aggrieved."

Once something is defined as news that which has made it newsworthy is likely to be accentuated (Galtung and Ruge, 1970). In the case of city centre redevelopment, for example, this has been the activity of property developers.

Both these considerations - that planning in itself is of little general interest, and that implementation in so far as it occurs at all, is a protracted process - affect the newsworthiness of the planners' work. Outwith feature articles, what tends to be reported at both national and local levels are the institutionalised controversies - in the form of council meetings, protest group activities, and public inquiries - over immediate development issues. At the same time, the ramifications of both planning decisions and long-term planning activity may provide newspapers with a fund of stories of more restricted focus.

B.. PLANNING COVERAGE IN THE NATIONAL PRESS.

On the quality national papers the more important planning stories may fall to one or more of a variety of specialist reporters, including political, property, and local government correspondents. Some journalists are concerned specifically with

'the environment' (as open ended as 'planning' itself), others with transport. There are also a number of 'planning reporters'[3] whose field will vary between papers, but is likely to include the activities of government departments whose decisions have immediate spatial consequences (at the national level; the D.O.E., in local government; housing, planning and transport). The designation 'planning reporter' is likely to conceal a bias of concern. Hillman concentrates predominantly on housing matters, while Tony Aldous until recently planning correspondent of the Times, had an architectural emphasis. This bias may be dictated by the newspaper itself. At a meeting (20.11.74) of the south east junior branch of the R.T.P.I., John Young, successor to Aldous attracted criticism for his paper's lack of consistent reporting of planning matters. He admitted that much of what he wrote was squeezed out by other material deemed more worthy of the paper's readership.

The Guardian has made most effort to woo the growing body of environmentalists, among whom the professional planner may be included. The paper has several regional and environmental reporters. Secondly, it often summarizes or makes reference to published material of planning interest (including government circulars, research findings, reports of voluntary organisations). Finally, there are its feature articles - for example, Hillman's full-page, three part review of slum clearance and redevelopment (May 1973).

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3 The Guardian was the first paper to have a planning correspondent - Brian Redhead, now editor of the Manchester Evening News. He was followed by Terence Bendixon. Second was the Evening Standard (1963), with Judy Hillman, now on the Guardian.

Despite the now recognised concern of many people for the environment, there often seems to be a gulf between the importance of a planning decision and the way in which it is covered by the media. Perhaps the real problem, suggest Booker and Gray (1973), is the way in which environmental or property stories get divided up into separate little bits, each of which may be reported in a different part of the paper. They distinguish four angles likely to be taken on a redevelopment scheme. First there is the historic buildings or aesthetic angle - 'City Landmark to Go' might be the headline. The reader is presented with one aspect of the scheme, but no basis for an informed judgement. Secondly, there is the human interest side; reports on protestors, the evicted old age pensioner, the arrival of the squatters. Then there is the plan itself. This may be presented dead pan - 'Council announces £10M City Centre Scheme', or might be spiced up - 'Facelift for the Dilly'. In either case the report is often little more than the council, or development company's handout. Fourthly, and most important of all, they argue, is the money angle, tucked away in the business section of the paper. Here may be revealed who pays and who profits from the scheme. Booker and Gray draw the analogy of sending four different reporters to cover a test match at Lords: 'But no one bothers to report what is actually going on in the middle, least of all the score at the end of the game.'

Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect such 'total' coverage. The national, London-based press is hardly the most appropriate

medium for scrutiny of what in most cases will be decisions of essentially local interest. Other newspapers lack the resources, and their journalists the time and information to probe many stories in this way. Booker and Gray do not have to meet the deadline of a daily newspaper. One planning reporter described them as living off the graft of day to day journalists ..... 'they are notorious for getting their facts wrong', he added[4].

C. THE SPECIALIST REPORTER.

The occupational constraints on the specialist reporter have been considered by Tunstall (1971) and although planning was not one of the fields he studied[5] some of his findings are applicable.

1. The flow of News.

There is a basic difference on a newspaper between news gatherers and news processors. After leaving the newsdesk a piece of copy passes perhaps five or six 'gatekeepers' before reaching print. The likely reasons for exclusion include policy of the paper, prejudice of the processors, and time. The nearer to edition time the stronger news value a story must have if it is not to be rejected with the explanation 'no space'. Tunstall somments: '... if a reporter hands his copy in at the newsdesk,

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4 In 1972, Booker and Gray founded their own property company (Claudins Properties, Ltd.). They challenged property developers by producing alternative schemes intended to show that councils could save money by developing sites themselves. In Camden, the council rejected Joe Levy's plans to redevelop Tolmers Square and have since outlined their own proposals. With the collapse of the property market the journalists have turned their attention to the government's land proposals, and local authority housing policies (cf. Observer, Nov./Dec. 1974).

5 These were: politics (lobby), aviation, education, labour, crime, football, fashion, motoring, and foreign correspondence.

but does not see it in the paper next morning, all he will know is that it disappeared somewhere in the processing.' If not rejected, his story may have been cut down. In 1965 a Financial Times journalist got six times as many column inches into his paper as did a Daily Express man, five times as much as a Daily Mirror or Sun journalist, and twice as much as those working for the Times or Guardian. This ratio may have altered. The Guardian is especially short staffed, and according to Judy Hillman almost everything that the specialists write is printed.

2. The significance of specialist status.

The allocation of a by-line to a journalist is the newspaper equivalent of the honours' system. He is given star treatment when his face or biography is projected with the story. At the same time, the name of a well-known correspondent attached to a report is believed to give it more 'weight', and readers are increasingly encouraged to regard unsigned pieces as of lesser importance. When a reporter receives regular by-lines he is usually permitted to be somewhat more discursive. (Judy Hillman (Guardian 25.1.74) recently began an article: "It is hard to take regional strategies and structure plans very seriously these days ..... and the Strategic Choice for East Anglia published today will only add strength to the campaign that reckons much of this sort of broad brush, long-term planning is a complete waste of time and money.") As their newspaper's acknowledged 'expert' on a subject, with an established audience for their work, many specialists may be encouraged to write more fully on their specialism.[6]

6 Books by planning reporters include:
Hillman, J. (1972) Planning for London : Penguin.
Booker, C. and Lycett Green, C. (1973) 'Goodbye London'. London: Fontana/Collins.
Jenkins, S. (1970) 'A City At Risk'. London: Hutchinson.
Aldous, T. (1972) Battle for the Environment. Glasgow: Collins.

3. Perception of own power.

Tunstall found that journalists made quite modest claims when asked: "In what sort of circumstances, if any, do you think specialists in your field wield significant power or influence?" Many answers took the form of "Very little, except when .....". Short term power or influence was believed to operate in relation to certain situations as "when planning decisions, for example the third London airport, are the subject of parliamentary or public debate" (Aviation correspondent).

Planning is, of course, not the exclusive province of specialist reporters. Different journalistic approaches operating within one newspaper are well illustrated by the London Evening Standard (as at August 1974). A consideration of its planning coverage will provide a news organisation context for the Piccadilly case-study.

D. THE EVENING STANDARD

First and perhaps most important, the paper has an editor who is 'sympathetic' to environment issues. The planning correspondent, for six years, had been David Wilcox. Other named reporters who often wrote up stories with a planning flavour were the G.L.C. (local government) and property correspondents. This specialist reporting was balanced by Simon Jenkin's weekly column on 'Living in London', containing a strong environment bias. Both Wilcox (psychology) and Jenkins (P.P.E.) were graduates, and relatively young.

Wilcox contrasted the areas of concern of specialist and columnist, the one looking at strategic issues in an analytical way, the other concerned with symptoms and case-studies. He saw different constraints (external to the news organisation) operating on each: the specialist should be prepared to stand by what he writes. He aims at a relatively informed audience and must win and retain their respect. More than the columnist he has to be cautious. Too provocative a report could damage valuable contacts, which, he said, were more important than public relations departments for most stories, although sometimes it might be necessary to extract from a press officer known information in order to protect the identity of the news source (typically a planning officer).

Jenkins reckoned that about one half of his stories were prompted by people getting in touch with the paper. Others were developed from local press items or based on personal experience. He believed that conservation was of general concern; that people were disturbed by a familiar environment changing, or the closure of the local shop. They were also aware of 'what went past their front door' - traffic. Issues he defined as 'things which affect either your pocket .... or your senses'.[7]

The columnist directs himself to a wider audience than the specialist. His stories must entertain not merely inform. The trouble with sumptom stories, said Wilcox, was that they diverted attention away from real issues. At the same time he felt there

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7 Jenkins was awarded a commendation in the category of 'Campaigning Journalist' by the judges of the I.P.C. National Press Awards, 1973.

was a danger of the specialist being lulled into the acceptance of professional values.

As a team, Wilcox and Jenkins reflected the public ambivalence towards journalism. A passive, expository approach may be interpreted as supporting the existing political and social system. But the watchdog, investigative journalist who calls 'wolf' once too often is dismissed as a crank. Over the Piccadilly redevelopment plans of May 1972, Jenkins (admitted Wilcox in retrospect) 'got it just about right'.

CHAPTER 2. THE REDEVELOPMENT OF PICCADILLY CIRCUS.

In May 1972, Westminster City Council (W.C.C.) formally published plans for the redevelopment of Piccadilly Circus. Reaction was immediate and for the most part hostile. By late June a 'Save Piccadilly Campaign' had collected 16,000 signatures on a petition for a public inquiry. 'Revised' plans were published but did little to conciliate opposition. At the end of September, the council announced that these too were being shelved, and that a sub-committee, set up in July, would produce alternative strategies for public comment, before a final decision was taken.

This, in outline, is a familiar story of a plan still-born. But Piccadilly Circus was different. First, it was a famous place: newspapers in Rio di Janeiro and Bombay, as well as most European countries, published a picture of a model of the new proposals. Secondly, it had a complicated planning history (Table 1). Roger Elgin (Observer 7.5.72) described it as the 'longest running farce in the West End'.

This study considers the coverage given by London papers to the 1972 proposals[1]. It is argued that the press made a significant and positive contribution to the planning debate which culminated in the council withdrawing the scheme. The chapter concludes by looking at subsequent relations between local authorities, pressure groups and the press as the search for acceptable proposals continued.

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1 No attempt has been made to assess how far the opinions expressed in each paper were determined by its political stance.

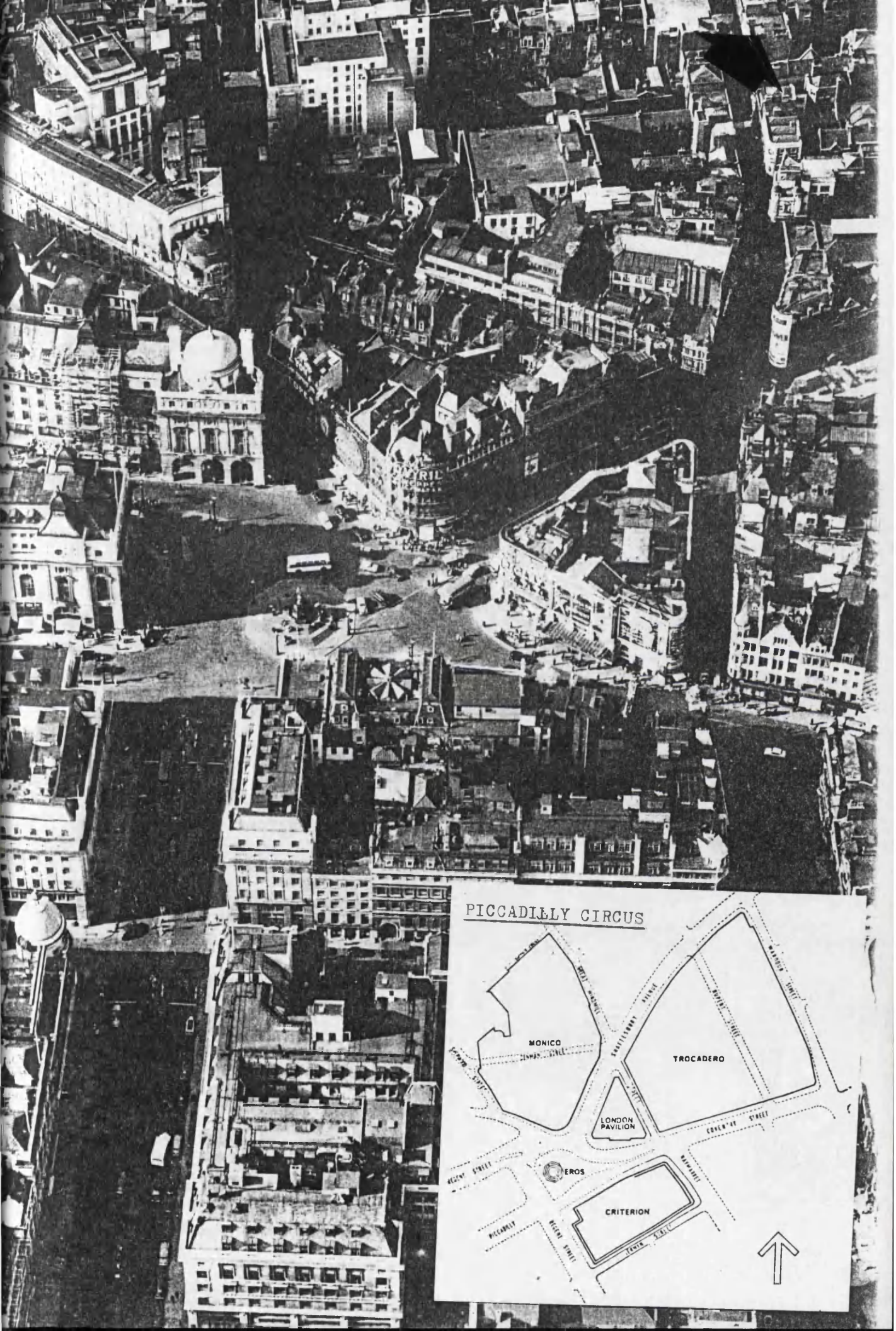
PICCADILLY CIRCUS
MONICO
TROCADERO
LONDON PAVILION
EROS
CRITERION
PICCADILLY
REGENT STREET

TABLE 1.

Piccadilly Circus : Recent Planning History to May 1972.

PLAN 1. 1959.

A compromise between the London County Council and Jack Cotton. The L.C.C. agreed to a 170' tower on Cotton's Monico site in return for land required for road widening.

1960. Rejected after a public inquiry.

PLAN 2. 1962.

Prepared by Sir William Holford for the L.C.C.

Accomodated a 20% increase in traffic; included a ground level piazza and the redevelopment of three sides of the Circus with blocks of regular height; recommended 120,000 sq.ft. of office space.

Rejected by Minister of Transport because it catered for an insufficient level of traffic flow.

1964. Joint working party set up.

PLAN 3. 1966.

Prepared by Holford for G.L.C. and W.C.C., on basis of recommendations of working party (reported April 1965).

Allowed for 50% traffic increase; proposed a free-standing pedestrian deck over road network. This could be extended by 'walkways' to link a wider area (including Covent Garden); recommended 195,000 sq.ft. of office space.

1967. Planning brief prepared for potential developers.

1968. 'Piccadilly Circus of the Future' exhibition displayed the developers' proposals.

Included a 435' tower on Criterion site, and 357,000 sq.ft. of office space.

Public outcry. Developers, hoping for one million sq.ft. of offices, complained that the planning brief was uneconomic. No planning applications submitted.

Table 1, contd.

1969. Piccadilly Circus designated an Action Area* in the Greater London Development Plan (G.L.C.).

1971. G.L.C. agreed to W.C.C. negotiating alone with developers.

1972 February. W.C.C. agreed to an exchange of approved land uses between Monico and Artillery Mansions sites, in order to reduce office content of the proposed redevelopment.

PLAN 4. 1972, May.

The integration of applications submitted by the three developers into a muted version of the 1968 scheme.

Included a 235' tower on Criterion site and pedestrian walkways rather than a platform; allowed for a 60% increase in traffice level; proposed office space up one third from 1968 to 544,420 sq.ft.

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* 'Action Area' is defined in the Town and Country Planning Act, 1971, as an area requiring comprehensive treatment by development, redevelopment or improvement.

A. THE PLAN (MAY 1972).

The May 1972 scheme was the fourth comprehensive plan for the area in thirteen years. The three main sites (illustrated) were held by Land Securities (Monico), Joe Levy (Trocadero) and Charles Forte (Criterion).

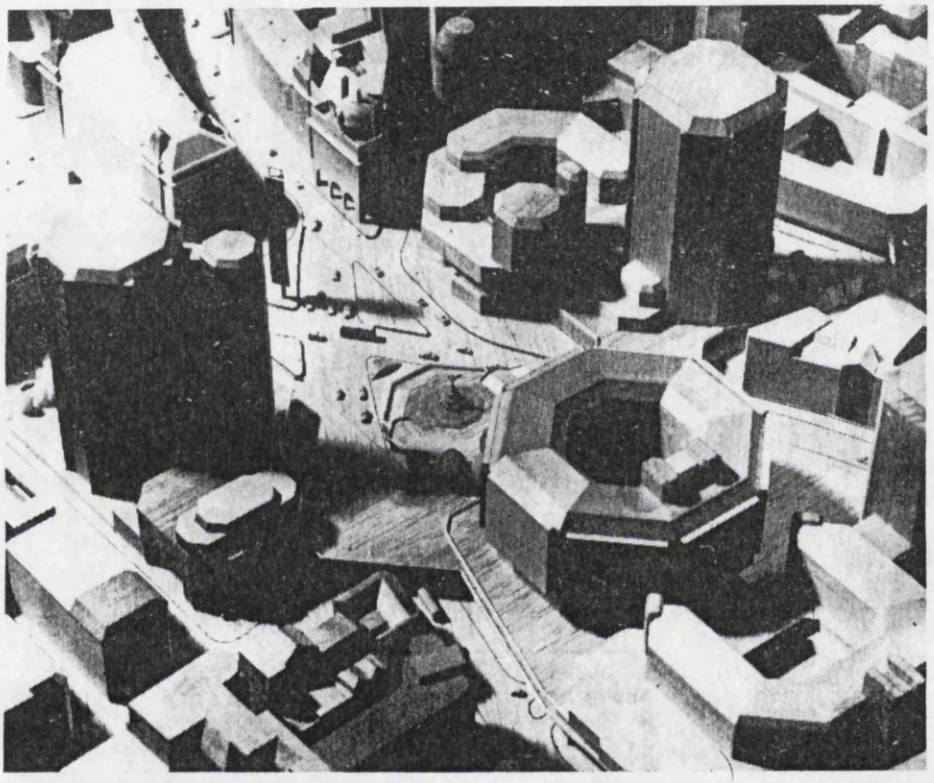
The scheme broke a three year deadlock between W.C.C. and the developers over the nature of redevelopment. It was made possible by the council suggesting (February 1972) that Land Securities should buy Artillery Mansions, Victoria Street, Westminster, a property with outline planning permission for hotel and residential development. The council would then be prepared to transfer this planning consent to Land Securities Piccadilly site, and allow office development in Victoria Road. The effect of this deal was to reduce the potential office content of the new Piccadilly from 833,000 sq.ft. to 544,420 sq.ft. (as against an existing 290,000 sq.ft.).

In April 1972 separate planning applications were submitted by the three developers, with the intention that they be integrated within a single plan. Plan 4 combined a one-third increase in office space with the toning down of the more controversial architectural proposals of the 1968 exhibition.

1. What the Press Said.

The plan for the circus was released at a press conference on Monday, May 2nd. By the weekend few people in the press had anything good to say about it: Westminster C.C.'s public relations appeared to have badly misfired. Much emphasis was laid on the 'secret' arrangement between council and developers, which also offended the minority Labour group on W.C.C.

II



Model of the 1972 scheme which caused such public opposition. Left: Criterion (architect: Dennis Lennon). Top right: Monico (architect: Sir John Burnet Tait). Right corner: Trocadero (architects: Sidney Kaye and Fitzroy Robinson)

The May 1972 Proposals

Of the national papers, the most balanced and incisive reporting appeared (as often) in the Financial Times. Two separate articles occupied threequarters of a page, one discussing the plan, the second ('No, not in Piccadilly') stating the opinion of the paper. A summary of its coverage (3.5.72) will present, at the outset, the main charges levelled against the proposals.

The Financial Times emphasised three aspects of the plan: the destruction of the Criterion theatre (whose 1874 auditorium was 'probably one of the oldest in use'); secondly, the provision for more traffic, in the absence of an overall city strategy; thirdly, the excessive provision of office space. For one scheme, the paper said, there were too many objectives. The importance of Piccadilly was primarily as a centre of entertainment and excitement, where office development should be kept to a minimum: '..... the council itself seems unsure of what it wants. In one breath it condemns the decay of the present area and in another hopes that the gaiety, life and slight vulgarity of the site can be maintained'. Peter Walker (Minister of the Environment) should put an end to it at once.

The Guardian, Telegraph, Times and Daily Mail also had editorials on the proposals (3.5.72). All were saddened, but only the Mail to the point of defiance: 'At the very least the fine old Criterion Theatre must be saved'. The Guardian ('.... whatever else can be said for the new development plan it won't be much fun .....') was sceptical, but apparently resigned to such follies. In similar vein the Telegraph rued the fact that '..... pretty well

every recent comprehensive redevelopment of every central city site has been a disaster'. The Times was cautious, suggesting that Holford's first scheme (Plan 2) was probably more attractive than any that had come before or after. It doubted the capability of the plan 'to transfer the life of a place with its full flavour from one collection of physical structures to another ..... the request for a public inquiry ought to be granted".

News coverage of the plan varied. The Financial Times and the Telegraph gave over threequarters of a page to it. Briefest of all was the Mirror, dismissing it in seven short sentences. More interesting were differences in the content of reports.

Judy Hillman, in the Guardian, emphasised the excessive office provision of the proposed development despite W.C.C.'s arrangement, observing that the 'press conference yesterday was brought to an end before the questions had even begun to shift towards the quality of the actual scheme itself'. She pointed out future implications of the plan: that China Town in Gerrard Street, Soho, was threatened by linked redevelopment and upper level pedestrianisation schemes[2].

By contrast, Tony Aldous, in a brief and breathless piece in the Times reported only the plan itself. There was no interpretation offered, nor mention of Labour party or other opposition to the scheme. Even the Sun commented on the 'new row' caused by Labour objections to the placating of property developers

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2 Interviewed on radio (3.5.72) Judy Hillman said she saw no need for redevelopment except for the Monico site, emphasising that the plan could be stopped if public opinion came out against it.

by swopping land uses. The Telegraph's coverage included a full report, without comment, on the background to the plan. The exchange of planning consents was referred to variously as a 'deal' (Guardian), 'compromise' (Telegraph), and 'game of Monopoly' (Morning Star).

By the next day (4.5.72) attention had shifted to national party level, with the demand by Anthony Crosland (Shadow Minister of the Environment) for a public inquiry. Aldous (the Times) discussed the form such an inquiry might take, given existing planning legislation. A different angle was taken by the Mail, which, under the headline 'How can they rip out London's heart?' had tracked down Ralph Reynolds, 'the Piccadilly Popcorn King' in order to guage local opinion.

There was a lull on 5.5.72, the Telegraph speculating on profits likely to be made, and the Guardian on the extent of empty office accomodation in London. On the sixth (Friday), Piccadilly was back in the headlines once more with Mr. Walker's hints that he would accede to the demand for a public inquiry.

The Sundays were also concerned about profits. Ironically, while Ivan Kallow in the Sunday Telegraph concluded that the three companies involved could each finish up more than £20M to the good, Michael Pye (Sunday Times) doubted whether the developments were money spinners at all. 'Even Joe Levy (he concluded) could be looking for more glamour than profit out of Piccadilly'. In the same paper, Nicholas Taylor, took up the planning implications of the development ('Soho : the next village

to go?'). He reasserted the conclusion of the Financial Times: 'The authorities cannot have it both ways : they cannot hope to preserve the existing vitality and cash in on it as well. It is quite simply a choice between community and profit.' The Observer was not particularly excited about the proposals although Nigel Gosling was on well trodden ground when he argued: 'What I want in the new circus is what I like in the old: the jostling crowds, roaring traffic, bustle, noise, lights, smells, confusion.'

It remains to consider the two papers which were first to publish details of the proposals, the London evening News and evening Standard. Both splashed the plan as their front page lead on 2.5.72 (Monday) and the controversy again made headlines on Tuesday and Thursday of that week. Whereas the News, the more 'popular' of the two, treated the story as routine copy, the Standard had deliberately worked it up.

On 20.4.72 the paper had revealed that demolition of the Criterion theatre was involved in the new scheme. In the Times of 1.5.72, a letter was published from John Betjeman expressing concern over this report, and that evening the Standard took up the story again, interviewing the author of the play currently running at the theatre. The day the plans were released the Standard was well prepared with stories researched & written up in advance. At the press conference, Jenkins and Wilcox took the initiative,'..... we just stood up and asked question after question'. The council, not expecting a full interrogation procedure, were 'flabbergasted' (Wilcox). That evening, the lead

news story, by Wilcox, referred to the 'unusual deal' by which the deadlock had been broken. Inside he set out in a dispassionate article the three aims of the plan : to clean up a 'down at heel, neon lit slum' (Councillor Cubitt, chairman of W.C.C. planning committee); to make a profit for three developers; and, to separate pedestrians from a big increase in traffic levels. There would also, he observed, be a large increase in rateable value for the council.

Balancing this interpretive analysis, the opposite page carried an 'open letter to Councillor Cubitt' by Simon Jenkins. Above it was a picture of the circus looking towards Haymarket. Where Wilcox was restrained, Jenkins was passionate, and unashamedly sentimental ('Piccadilly is one of those few corners of London which is not revered or appreciated or even treasured. It is loved.'). But the article also made telling points against the plan: for example, Westminster's confusion of aims for the new Piccadilly; a definition of 'obsolescent' which meant 'more money could be saved by pulling buildings down and starting afresh with new uses, particularly offices'; and the 'quite stupefying foolishness' of planning for local traffic increase without a wider consideration.

The article was important for another reason. It met the council not on its chosen territory (the physical details of the plan or the economics of redevelopment) but on what it would do for 'Piccadilly', the myth. Defending the plan later on radio 4, Councillor Cubitt argued that the new Piccadilly would

look like a circus; and that Eros would be visible from all parts and dominate it more than he did at present. To Jenkins it mattered not a jot what shape the area was, or even very much what happened to the statue: 'Piccadilly can't be seen only felt. I believe you could even take Eros away and few people would notice the difference. Yet, (Mr. Cubitt), Eros is all you are leaving us.' The worth of Piccadilly, he was suggesting, was not the physical environment (Cubitt's 'run down, neon-lit slum), but an atmosphere, ' ..... life and vitality in abundance ..... Take tiny Denman Street, for instance, doomed in its entirety. Even today it can muster three night clubs, a cinema, six Italian restaurants, the Help the Aged office, the Mazurka club, three pubs, the Casino de Paris and Body Review, a couple of kiosks and 'Marion - first floor'[3]'.

On what basis, he concluded, did the plan assume, in its provision of walkways, that people would still be attracted in great numbers to the new Piccadilly. By backing a large-scale speculative development which offended both private property and public amenity, the local authority was neglecting its public responsibility.

The Evening News was more cautious and less consistent in its attitude to the scheme. The lead story on 2.5.72 (by Leonard Vigas) presented the plan favourably ('A bright new Piccadilly Circus .... people will stroll on a 'deck' - in effect a tree lined promenade') although a more thoughtful report,

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3 Marion was still there in January 1975.

plus a piece on Joe Levy, 'Mr. Piccadilly', appeared inside. These were by Robert Langton, now property correspondent of the Evening Standard. Next day (3.5.72) the paper's editorial criticised the excessive office provision, while recognising that 'the old Circus becomes tattier and more vulgar and a disgrace to the metropolis'. On its front page the paper published a letter, "typical of many" received, all with a common 'Leave London Alone' theme. It was confusing, therefore, to find inside a half-page report which concluded that ' ..... London likes its new Piccadilly. That was the majority on-the-spot verdict of visitors to the Action Piccadilly Circus exhibition.' On Thursday, 5.5.72, reporting Walker's hints of a probable inquiry, the paper made the dubious boast: 'The Evening News was first to question when the planners put out their latest schemes for Piccadilly, should they leave London alone? Tonight we get action.'

2. Role of the Press.

Why were the proposals such good copy for the newspapers? Primarily because there were so many angles to the story, and most of these fitted accepted 'news' categories. First, Piccadilly Circus was a symbol - to tourists of 'London', to the British of history and achievement (the hub of the empire). It, in itself, was scarcely 'news', ('everybody knows Piccadilly Circus') but any attempt to change it was. Secondly, redevelopment involved the demolition of a theatre (combining a conservation and arts/entertainment angle). Thirdly, there was the matter of profits. In 1972, the workings of property companies, the

existence of empty offices, and - deliciously - a council deal with developers, conformed to another story-type. In addition some journalists were genuinely outraged by the plan. In whose interests was it? Did the council itself know what it wanted? How could Piccadilly be changed out of all recognition, yet somehow remain the same?

Although organisations, both established (R.I.B.A.) and new (Save Piccadilly Campaign) soon mobilised in opposition to the plan, it was the press reaction in the first few days which set down the terms of discussion. On the night of its release, it was against journalists that the chairman of W.C.C. planning committee had to defend the council's proposals[4].

Jenkins believes that the press (not the Standard in particular) played a 'crucial role' in obstructing the scheme. To Wilcox, the affair was a 'media event'. By this he meant that journalists had taken up the story spontaneously, independent of public opinion. That the opposition mounted and was ultimately successful confirmed that the media's analysis found general acceptance. For considered comment, the best buys were the Standard and the Financial Times.

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4 Councillor Cubitt and Simon Jenkins appeared separately, for and against the plan on I.T.V.s 'Today' programme (6.00 p.m. 2.5.72). In the evening (on the 'World Tonight', radio 4) Cubitt defended the plan against Wilcox: It would 'clean up' the area, and create for the first time in architectural form a real circus at Piccadilly. But will it continue to be exciting and to attract, asked Wilcox, and why the comprehensive approach?

Three questions, with wider implications for planning, were raised in the press coverage of Piccadilly.

1. Why comprehensive development - was it really the only way?

2. Why total commitment to a large increase in local traffic levels in the absence of a city-wide strategy?

3. Why prolonged council negotiations with developers to the detriment of the sounding of public opinion?

Perhaps the council's most unfortunate mistake was its dealings with the press prior to publication day. Six weeks previously specialist reporters were invited to confidential briefings on the council's negotiations with the developers. The veto on reporting was viewed less as an embargo (delayed publication) than as a total news blackout[5]. The press did not take kindly to being made party to a process involving deals with companies first, and public consultation later. As a result, when they were free to publish, several journalists were extremely critical both of the scheme and of W.C.C.'s handling of the affair. Their attacks were justified by the speed with which alternative and very different strategies were forthcoming, and by Westminster's effort to involve the public in the final selection of a plan.

The changed framework within which planning was to take place is illustrated by a comparison of terms of reference for the 1969 working party and the December 1972 six principles (Table 2).

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5 "The remarkably unfavourable reception given by the press to the latest Piccadilly redevelopment proposals may have taken on an even sharper edge because of what some journalists took as an attempt by W.C. officials to soften them up or even gag them." (P.H.S. Times, 5.5.72)

TABLE 2.

Piccadilly Circus : The Redefining of the Problem.

1. 1964 WORKING PARTY. Terms of Reference.

"To determine the area which is of significance in relation to the traffic passing through Piccadilly Circus, and to consider probable developments in that area affecting the volume and composition of that traffic in the foreseeable future; to consider what measures could be taken in that area during the next twenty years to deal with the traffic expected; and in the light of this to assess the load of traffic for which the Circus will have to provide."

2. DECEMBER 1972 PUBLIC CONSULTATION PAPER. Principles for public comment.

1. That some improvement in traffic capacity - perhaps of the order of 10% - should be accepted* coupled with implementation of traffic management measures to preserve the environment in Soho and St. James.

2. That certain specified buildings of historical or architectural value should be retained and rehabilitated. The remainder could be redeveloped.

3. That there should be no pedestrian deck.

4. That it is essential to improve pedestrian facilities at ground and subway level.

5. That the height and bulk of any new buildings should be restricted to that of existing buildings.

6. That office floorspace should be replaced on a foot for foot plus 10 per cent increase basis and that any residential accomodation demolished should be replaced and an increase encouraged.

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* Excluded from W.C.C. planning brief, October 1973.

The exclusive concern of the former with traffic flow had gone. Where previously site owners had defined the limits of planning activity, by 1972 the major constraints stated were those of perceived public opinion. These included the virtual halving of proposed office space and the restrictions on the form of new development.

B. PLANNERS, THE PLANNED AND THE PRESS (1972-1975).

Nearly three years later no redevelopment has occurred and between the two authorities responsible for the 'Action Area' (the G.L.C. and W.C.C.) there is disagreement over the extent of redevelopment necessary. Although the press may respond to a dramatic event like the publication of a plan it was suggested in chapter 1 that prolonged dramas are less easy to report. This section looks at the subsequent attitudes of the press to the planning of Piccadilly, and its changing relationship with the planners (the local authorities) and some of the planned (the protest groups).

The main events since May 1972 are summarized in Table 3. Following the publication of the consultative document (December 1972) an intensive public participation exercise took place[6]. This was concluded in March 1973 when 51% of returned questionnaires supported the council's favoured option which involved demolition of the entire frontage of the Circus within

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6 The chairman of W.C.C. Piccadilly committee, Alderman Sandford, gave forty-two presentations of the plan. They included what was claimed to be the first use in planning of audio visual techniques.

TABLE 3.

Piccadilly Circus : 1972 - 1975.

1972	May 2.	W.C.C. presented plan 4.
	14.	The 'Save Piccadilly Campaign' set up.
	June.	Plan 4 'revised' to save the Criterion theatre.
	July.	'Piccadilly Forum' organised by Royal Institute of British Architects (R.I.B.A.)
		S.P.C. held a participatory planning weekend.
		W.C.C. set up a Piccadilly sub-committee.
	September.	Plan 4 shelved by W.C.C.
	December.	'Green paper' published by W.C.C. - a consultative document presenting a set of principles together with four possible development options.
		Start of the public participation exercise.
1973	January.	Public meeting organised by R.I.B.A. in which
		W.C.C.'s options rejected for an alternative 'maximum conservation' scheme.
	March.	W.C.C. end participation exercise.
	(April.	G.L.C. elections. Labour council returned.)
	October.	W.C.C. published planning brief based on their favoured option (number three).
1974	March.	Plans to develop Criterion site submitted on behalf of Trust Houses Forte.
	October.	Criterion plans granted outline planning approval by W.C.C.
		G.L.C. planning committee approved option involving least redevelopment (number one).
1975	February.	G.L.C. guaranteed continuous performance of Criterion theatre during redevelopment.

the Action Area, excluding the Criterion Theatre. The proposals formed the basis of the planning brief published in October 1973. Controversy since then has centred on the Criterion site. Theatre opinion and the Save Piccadilly Campaign (S.P.C.) feared that if the theatre were to close (while its dressing rooms and the bar were rebuilt) it might not re-open, or at best the lease would be unfavourably renegotiated.

1. Westminster City Council.

To the council Piccadilly was one planning issue - although an exceptionally sensitive one - among many[7]. It was not only a local environment problem, but also a borough policy problem. In a report (1974) the planning department identified three possible, and often conflicting views of Westminster: as capital city (with implications of 'offices'), as historic city ('monuments'), and as a residential community ('homes').[8] To individuals the borough meant different things at different times, but the authority had to juggle all considerations at once.

Public consultation and a promise of controls over new development did not mean that W.C.C. had abandoned the comprehensive approach. It could be argued that the public outcry had done little to change attitudes. On the tape played at participation meetings Sandford said he wished to make the Circus a place where he could take his wife and children.

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7 In October 1974, plans for the redevelopment of part of Trafalgar Square provoked much publicised opposition. Booker and Gray were involved in a demonstration against the proposals.

8 City of Westminster Development Plan. Report on Stage One : Problems, Issues, & Priorities. Oct. 1974).

However, as soon as the council argued redevelopment on grounds other than the structural condition of the existing buildings it became vulnerable and open to contradiction.

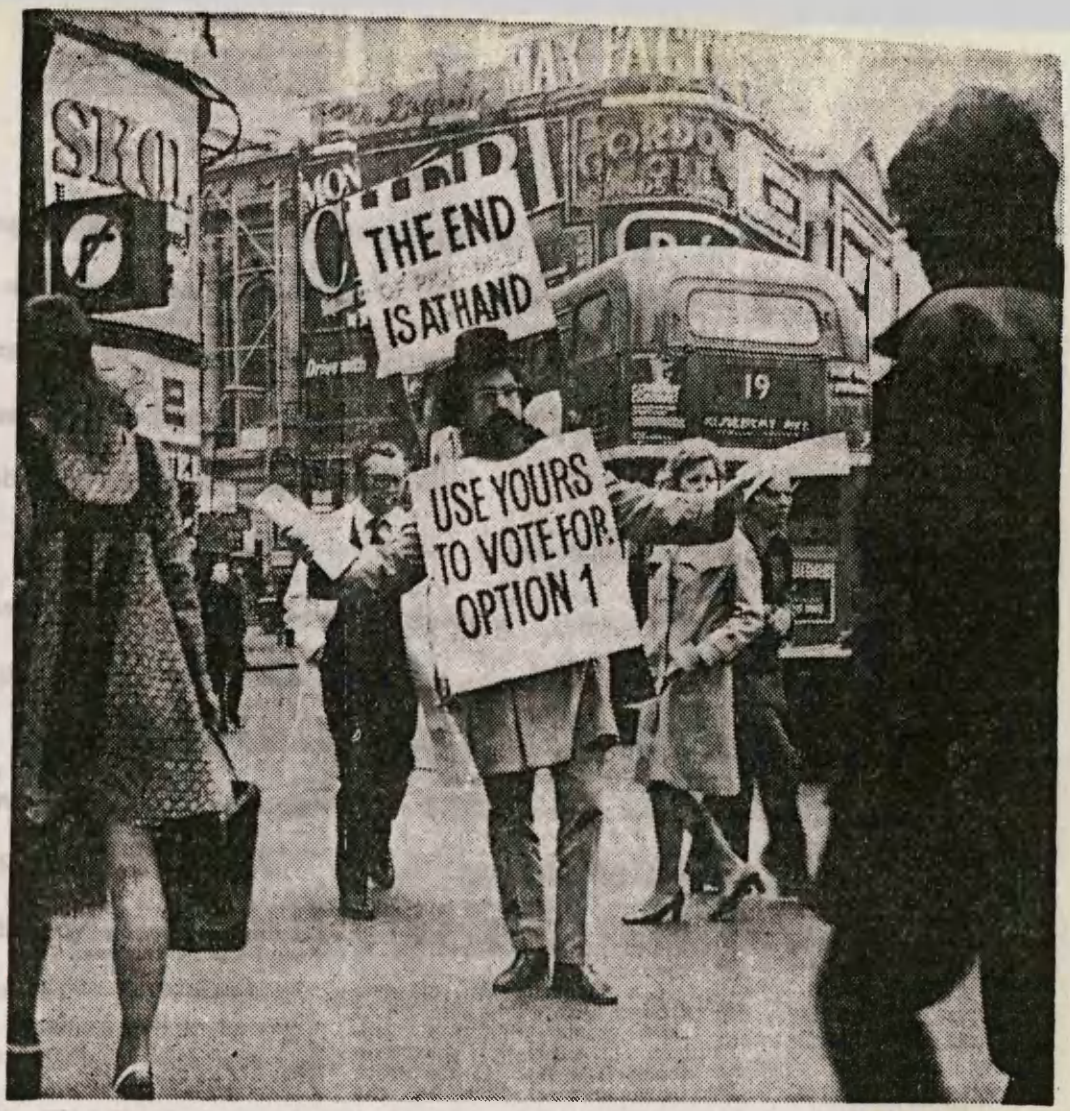
The prospects for Piccadilly, as for other areas of London, were altered by the election of a Labour G.L.C. in April, 1973, on a 'Save London' ticket. (One of the council's first acts was to scrap the proposed inner urban motorway.) In October 1973 its planning committee defied the W.C.C. (Conservative) by giving outline approval for the option involving least redevelopment. 'For too long', said its chairman, 'we have had a succession of impractical plans which would have changed the very identity of this important centre of London.'

2. The 'Save Piccadilly Campaign'.

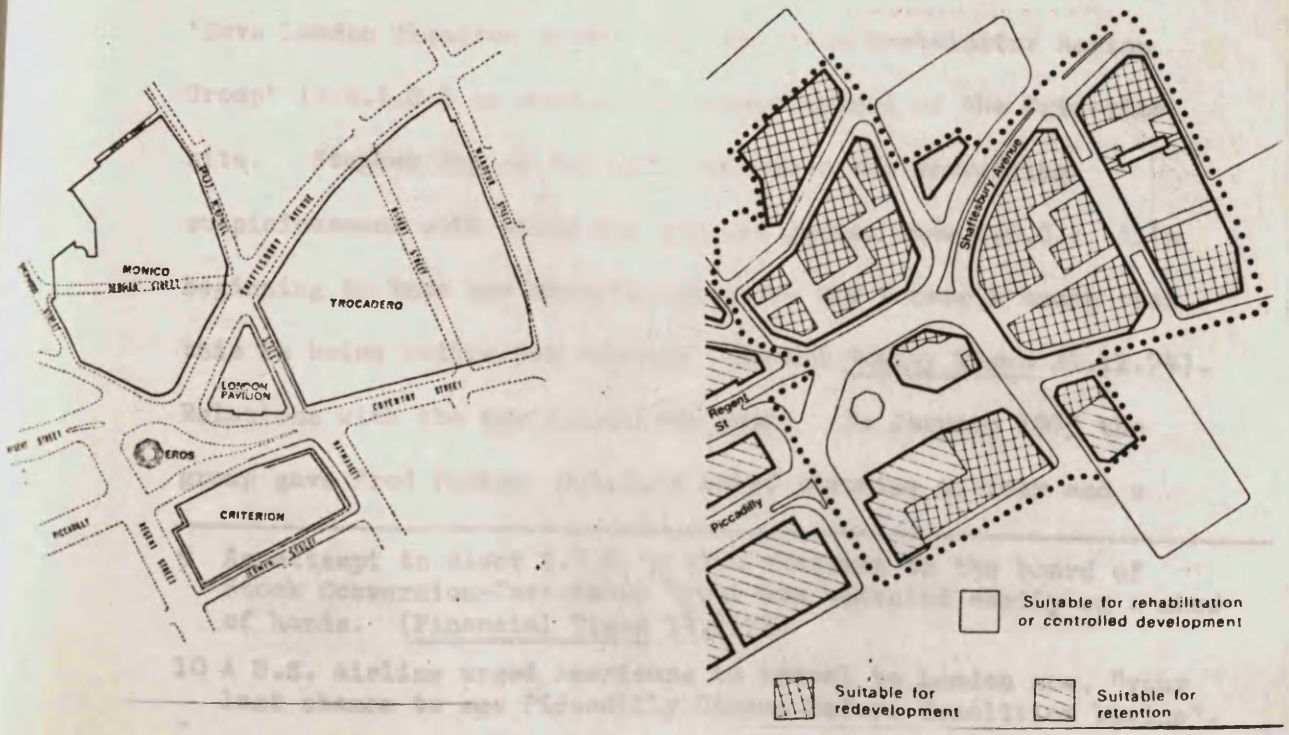
S.P.C. was set up at a public meeting (14.5.72) chaired by Ed Berman, the American director of the 'Almost Free Theatre' in Rupert Street. It was launched with the assistance of the media, notably the leftist listing magazine Time Out, whose business manager, Peter Steadman, was a founder member.

Its platform was simple and has not changed. It is 'to stop any comprehensive redevelopment, and to insist on the revitalisation of existing buildings and infill'. (S.P.C. Annual Report, 1973).

S.P.C.'s concern is almost exclusively to protect existing residential and commercial uses. Its activities have included a participatory planning weekend, a photographic exhibition, several surveys, reports and petitions. Members



December 1972: ED BERMAN campaigns to save Piccadilly Circus from massive redevelopment.



Westminster's favoured option, 3

even bought shares in the three property companies entitling them to attend company meetings[9]. In the autumn of 1972 Ed Berman toured America to win support for the campaign (and at the same time dispel rumours that the Circus might be bought up and shipped over to the States)[10].

The organisation of S.P.C. owes much to the experience of the Covent Garden Community Association - 'London's crucial pressure group' according to one Piccadilly activist. C.G.C.A. had been campaigning, with success, against comprehensive development of the area around the market after its move to Nine Elms in the autumn of 1974. S.P.C. has sometimes damaged its credibility by simplemindedness: for example, 'Central London is in a mess. Once this is realised, action is not too difficult to devise to meet the problems' (S.P.C. Annual Repprt 1974).

Dismissing W.C.C.'s participation exercise as a 'soft soap sell' the campaign has subsequently collaborated with the 'Save London Theatres Group' and the 'Save Westminster Action Group' (S.W.A.G.) in contesting redevelopment of the Criterion site. Stephen Fry of S.W.A.G. expresses the prevailing suspiciousness with which the protest groups view W.C.C.: 'I'm beginning to know how Westminster works and I have a hunch that this is being railroaded through' (quoted Sunday Times 24.11.74). Relations with the new G.L.C. are good. In January 1975 the group gave Fred Pooley, G.L.C.'s chief planning officer and a

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9 An attempt to elect S.P.C.'s vice chairman to the board of Stock Conversion-Investment Trust was outvoted easily on a show of hands. (Financial Times 14,8.73)

10 A U.S. airline urged Americans to travel to London now, "your last chance to see Piccadilly Circus before demolition begins".

member of R.I.B.A., a conducted tour of the Action Area.

3. The Press.

W.C.C.'s participation gesture in December 1972 met with a curious but sympathetic reaction. Even Simon Jenkins credited Westminster Council for the enthusiasm with which it had taken up the 'conversion of Councillor Cubitt' (E.S. 19.12.72)[11]. In many papers the novelty of the participatory approach diverted attention from the nature of W.C.C.'s preferred option. In saying that 'the council seems to have rejected the idea of a complete and comprehensive redevelopment' the Telegraph misled its readers (editorial 11.12.72). The News gave only four column inches to the publication of the consultative document, and failed to mention that it was not a plan but four options that were being presented.

What was lacking in December 1972 and after was comment. Most of the press was bored with Piccadilly ('Not Round Piccadilly Again!') and believed the public to be likewise. The Guardian, for example, appeared to consider Piccadilly 'news' in that new planning activity and controversy was worth reporting, but that the days when the Circus was something to be talked about, were over.

It was left largely to the specialist press to

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11 The article prompted a letter from the leader of the minority Labour party on W.C.C., noting 'for the benefit of religious accuracy' that it was he 'who requisitioned the special meeting of W.C.C. on May 31 to reconsider the proposals of Piccadilly and in fact urged the formation of a special committee to consider Piccadilly again.'
(Illfyd Harrington, Standard, 12.12.72)

assess the validity of the participation exercise. The film - "We have no special traffic vanishing cream at County Hall" - was described as 'amateurish, hackneyed, banal, trite' (Building Design 26.1.73). However, a public meeting organised by R.I.B.A., where a fifth (maximum conservation) option was presented, received wide coverage. It also served to advertise two major grievances of S.P.C., that all the council's publicity was weighted towards their preferred option; and the refusal by W.C.C. to open a local planning office in the Circus. Most unfortunate was the failure by the council to put a closing date on the participation exercise. As Des Wilson wrote in the Observer (25.3.73): '.... opponents of W.C.C.'s plans for Piccadilly have been shaken by the abrupt ending of public consultation. They claim the council's questionnaires had no closing date (true), that analysis of the response was cut off without warning after only 1,200 replies (true), and that closure came when public reaction was swinging away from the council's plan (possible).'

In January 1973 the Standard had enjoyed a minor scoop in the form of an exclusive interview with reticent property developer Joe Levy: "If Westminster City Council and the Government don't act soon, you can all kiss goodbye to a new Circus" (quoted Standard 19.1.73). When W.C.C.'s planning brief emerged in October 1973 most stories centred on S.P.C.'s opposition to it. In the Financial Times Peter Riddel accurately and concisely related the brief to the May 1972 proposals and to G.L.C. and S.P.C. attitudes. Subsequently Artscritics[12] and

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12 notably John Barber in the Telegraph.

others have voiced their concern through the press over the threat to the Criterion Theatre. To some extent this has obscured the increasing sympathy, or at the least disinterest, shown by the press to the efforts of the authority. To take a perhaps untypical example, the Times (16.10.74) had an editorial on planning blight in the West End - citing Piccadilly as the worst but 'by no means the only example'. The paper blamed everybody and nobody in the same breath; 'the planners themselves must take a large part of the responsibility. But there are other culprits. Conservationists show a negative tendency to oppose any sort of redevelopment, when it is obvious that no city can live forever on its past. As for the developers, the principal reason why some of the shabbier West End buildings are in their present state is that their owners hope, by running them down to press local authorities into permitting profitable redevelopment.'

Next day, the chairman of W.C.C. planning committee wrote thanking the Editor for 'the deep thoughts' behind his leading article (letter - Times 17.10.74). 'There are,' he wrote, 'sectional groups that believe theirs is the only view to be considered whereas a planning committee has to give weight to the greatest good of all sections.' The contrast drawn sat strangely with what followed: 'It must be remembered that a planning committee is bound to take into account planning matters. Extraneous points such as landlord and tenant relationships' - one of the main planks of the S.P.C. - 'are covered by other parts of

the law'.

The converse of this trend has been the declining rapport between press and S.P.C. The protestors had for a long time enjoyed a good relationship with the Standard and David Wilcox, but an article of his (15.11.74) was seen as a betrayal. Concerning the Trust Houses-Forte plans for the Criterion site, he wrote: 'I believe the new buildings should go up .... the day of massive redevelopment in Central London is probably over .... don't office workers deserve better conditions?'

Two weeks later Wilcox was in trouble with another powerful London pressure group, the Covent Garden Community Association. The charge was one of blaming past planning excesses on public attitudes of the 1960's. This was too easy, claimed Jim Monahan, founder of C.G.C.A. 'The original plan' - he might have been writing of Piccadilly - 'was rife with gross errors of judgement and demonstrated an appaling ignorance of what makes up Covent Garden. Surely these faults are professional faults and do not derive from public opinion.' (letter - Standard 28.11.74). Wilcox was accused of papering over the continuing failure of the politicians.

C. CONCLUSIONS.

In the months following the initial furore over the May 1972 plan, the different ways in which council, protestors, and the press, viewed Piccadilly became clear. Westminster Council saw it as a planning problem, and one which had diverted attention and energies from other issues in the borough. It looked for a speedy but satisfactory solution. To the campaigners the Circus was their local environment under threat. Only S.P.C. was concerned exclusively with the fate of Piccadilly. The media were less interested in Piccadilly for its own sake, than in the news value of the controversy surrounding its redevelopment. Journalists had editors and readers not particularly interested in the Circus to consider. Other stories competed for attention.

As the news value of the plans quickly subsided so too did that of the S.P.C. Their demands in March 1975 were essentially those of May 1972. In the time-scale of the daily newspaper S.P.C. had become as much a part of the establishment as Westminster Council. The art of the journalist is to spot the rising star. He asks what is going to happen next, and usually lets his readers assess the consequences of past action. W.C.C. does not need publicity to achieve the ends it sets. On the contrary, as in this case, it often means delay, bother, and frustration. An organisation like S.P.C., however, depends on the publicising of its cause. Increasingly, in a protracted

struggle, it finds itself running to keep its ground. By January 1975 Piccadilly activists were questioning whether papier maché caricatures of property developers displayed outside company meetings did anything more than provide journalists with easy copy. Yet the alternative - silence - was less satisfactory still. If the buildings in the Circus were to remain, action was needed to stop them falling down.

The importance of the publicity surrounding Piccadilly, and test cases like it, is the exposure it gives to the mechanisms of local government. In this instance the media first made people aware that their elected representatives were advocating a plan 'patently inimicable to the everyday interests of the ordinary residents of London' (Financial Times 3.5.72). Secondly, it helped prove that in planning 'there are always alternatives' (Jenkins, Standard 9.5.72). Finally, by focusing attention on a specific issue it has forced public accountability onto a local authority at each stage of decision making. The establishment press does not threaten the political system; it does on occasion challenge the responsiveness of those who operate it - representatives and officials - to the will of the electorate.

CHAPTER 3 : THE LOCAL PRESS

A. COMMERCIAL NEWSPAPERS.

The recurrent ills of Fleet Street - falling circulations and rising costs, overstaffing and outdated technology - are widely reported. If there is no longer a shortage of newsprint it is because last year saw a 12% dip in national press advertising.[1] Not one of the London national morning papers is now profitable (Murdock and Golding, 1974).

Provincial and local papers are particularly vulnerable to economic recession. About 80% of the revenue on a weekly comes from advertising - the rest is from sales - of which about half is classified.[2] A slump in advertising (as happened in 1974, especially in recruitment and property sectors) means a smaller paper and proportionally less news. Newspaper owners and editors, as businessmen, must guage that balance of news and advertising which will give a viable level of profit.

1. Organisation.

The 1960's were years of newspaper closure and of managerial merger. Between 1962 and 1964 six cities lost one of their evening papers - Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester and Nottingham. In 1974 the closure of Beaverbrook's Evening Citizen in Glasgow left only Londoners with a choice of

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1 Newsprint now accounts for more than one third of basic costs, compared with about 20 per cent in 1972. (Sheila Black, Times, 27.1.75).

2 Provincial papers did particularly well out of the boom in classified advertising of the early 1970s. However in some places a near advertising monopoly has been challenged by firms distributing giveaway weekly advertisers, and by the advent of commercial radio.

evening paper. Circulation of all categories of newspaper has fallen off since a peak in the middle fifties (Table 4).

The press has become dominated by a comparatively small number of companies. Three groups produce 72% of national dailies' circulation, and 86% of the national Sundays'. By 1969 over half the English and Welsh provincial evening press was in the hands of five newspaper chains (the Westminster Press, Associated Newspapers, United Newspapers, News of the World Organisation, the Thomson Organisation). The groups' controlling share of the weeklies also grew - from 11% in 1961 to over 20% in 1969 (Jackson, 1971). In the summer of 1973 the transfer of 18 Kent and Sussex papers to the Westminster Press gave the company control of over 100 weekly titles, accounting for 10.3% of the total circulation of weekly newspapers in the U.K. Group ownership does not mean that proprietors dictate editorial policy (although they do, of course, appoint the editor). It does lead to the syndicating of some editorial and feature material. The 1962 Royal Commission on the Press was apprehensive about the effect this could have on the local character of papers.

Many evenings are direct offshoots of morning dailies, and are produced in the same office. Although a later development, they are the 'successful' partner. The provincial morning paper has to compete with the national dailies, and is itself a product of an organisation modelled on Fleet Street. At the opposite extreme is the purely 'local' paper, increasingly rare, run by a

TABLE 4.

Circulation of Newspapers within U.K.

(figures in thousands)

Year	National Morning	London Evening	Provincial Morning	Provincial Evening	National and Provincial Sundays	Weeklies/ Bi-weeklies
1937	9,980	1,806	1,600	4,400	15,259	8,561
1947	15,634	3,500	2,700	6,800	28,256	11,908
1957	16,761	2,858	2,000	7,000	30,180	12,372
1967	15,625	1,905	1,971	6,886	26,628	13,251
1972	14,333	1,379	1,992	6,700	24,464	12,844
1973	14,549	1,326	2,029	6,599	24,390	12,730

TABLE 5.

Launchings and Closures 1969-1973.

Paper	Launched	Closed	Total Number (June 1973)*
National Morning		1	9
National and Provincial Sunday	2	2	14
Provincial Morning		1	19
Evening	5	1	81
Weeklies/ Bi-weeklies	70	103	1,137

* Besides publishing nine national daily and seven national Sunday papers London has two evening papers (circulation 1,326) and 145 weeklies (circulation 1,669).

Source: 20th Annual Report of the Press Council (1974).

proprietor-editor. When the local weekly is a part of a larger group there is often a comparatively modest local operation on the editorial side, with a more elaborate general finance and policy structure centralised elsewhere.

The weekly is unlikely to be in competition with the daily provincial press. It provides a different focus of interest for its readers. While most morning papers aspire to be 'quality' regional dailies, the evening press has a more 'popular' character, with more human interest stories and feature articles. It is designed for a reader who is unwinding after work. Largely a city phenomenon, it is much more of a habit in the north of Britain than in the south. The weekly has tended to combine the functions of broad sheet, review magazine, and the public notice board. It thrives on the predictable, containing (in Jackson's terminology (1971)) a large proportion of "institutional order" reports - of meetings, activities, organisations. It projects public happenings and the work of local public figures, and according to a recent analysis carried out by the Newspaper Society (which represents owners of the provincial press), is particularly popular with the middle class reader (White, 1974).

The weeklies have particular problems. First, deadlines may fit badly with the timing of committee meetings. (A weekly publishing on Friday will require most stories to be written up by Wednesday morning.) Secondly, constraints on space

are greater than in other papers. News items serve to fill the gaps between regular features. Thirdly, topical news will have appeared in the regional dailies first; the concept of worthy but 'dead' news is a familiar one to the editor of a weekly. Finally, local government reorganisation has meant that there are not enough reporters to go round all the committees now open. Where a single authority is covered by more than one paper some arrangements may be made between them.

2. Recruitment and Career Structure.

An important organisational constraint on the local press is the employment structure of the newspaper industry. Local papers tend to recruit reporters from school leavers. If a junior shows promise he will be in line for a transfer - from the weekly to the provincial daily, and perhaps to Fleet Street; or to one of the other branches within the profession, such as magazine publishing, broadcasting, or public relations. Cox and Morgan (1973) found that staffs in Liverpool comprised a few middle-aged journalists supervising and directing assistants twenty years their junior. The weeklies employed between five and ten journalists making specialisation impossible.

The youth, inexperience and frequent turnover of newsgatherers at the local level means that reporters are learning how local government works at the same time as they are writing about it. As Burke (1974) says, 'one of the gravest problems that faces any local reporter when he attends a council meeting

is that he does not know the background - the institutional background - which is so readily accepted by local authority members and officers.' The Association of County Councils has expressed anxiety about the standards of new entrants to journalism. It remarks on the low number of graduates found on regional and local papers[3] and warns that 'there is a danger that the press could in the years ahead find itself out of step educationally at all levels'. (Evidence to Royal Commission on the Press[4] : quoted, Guardian, 29.11.74.)

3. The Press and the Establishment.

It is often suggested that the local editor and reporter become drawn into an official view of reality. Although local editorship is not without advantages (the paper will know how the town works) it may mean an over-close sympathy with the local system and the individuals who operate it. Not only will the local editor tend to stress consensus and shared values, but he may accept as normal and inevitable what to an outsider would seem highly questionable. On Merseyside the local press was 'not exactly without opinion but a high proportion of it is extremely bland and inoffensive.' (Morgan and Cox, 1973).

While controversy is an essential part of local news, the sort of conflicts covered are those that take place within the system, preferably in local government debates. If, for

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3 Of the six to seven hundred trainees who join provincial newspapers each year less than one hundred are graduates. 'It is unlikely to rise substantially in the foreseeable future' (Central Services Unit for University Careers and Advisory Services, May 1974).

4 Set up by Harold Wilson in May 1974, with the specific task of inquiring into editorial standards.

example, a group opposed to a clearance scheme prepares a report which is considered by a local government committee, this features in the minutes and is written up by the town hall reporter. But, as Murphy (1974) observes, the stories which are not published and the angles which are not taken, reveal as much about the paper as those which are. He cites the coverage of a rates tribunal which he attended with a reporter from a local weekly. The valuation panel heard three claims for rates reduction. Business activities of the presiding chairman were connected with all of them. The reporter knew this but declined to centre a story around this coincidence, reckoning that the hearing would make three separate items. Nor did his editor consider the business interests of this sometime council chairman particularly newsworthy : 'everybody knows old X owns the town without us telling them'.

The local press is ill-equipped to probe because this has not been part of its traditional function. John Ardill, local government/regional affairs correspondant of the Guardian, began his career on a local paper in the north east in the days when the Poulson empire was being created. He admits to having had a nagging sense that the 'avuncular alderman and grave clerks kindly answering my questions would have not the slightest difficulty pulling wool over my eyes if they so wished.' (Municipal Journal, November, 1974.)

In May, 1974, the Guardian carried an acrimonious

correspondence between journalists as to why the local press did not uncover the Poulson affair. One reporter on the Northern Echo was detached from most of his normal duties for three months to investigate Andrew Cunningham. According to the paper's editor he discovered a lot but nothing conclusive and "newspapers cannot afford to report smoke if they are unable later to exhibit in court the fire that produced it" (Evans, letter, Guardian, 3.5.74)[5].

Most editors, as that of the Barnet Press, respect the work councillors do and the time they devote to public affairs. The local press is not conspiracy oriented. It thrives on the health of the community and sees itself as a binding force within it. Jackson (1971) suggests four contributions made by the local press to local life:

1. Promotion of sense of community identity and cohesion.
2. Provision of political, institutional and cultural information (leading to a permanent record of local affairs).
3. Provision of a platform for debate and complaints.
4. Publicising of goods and services available, situations vacant, announcements and notices.

What this list conceals is the bland quality of much that appears in most local papers. It is this which is supplemented,

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5 Private Eye, enjoying the advantage of detachment, was more persistant. Bernard Levin, no Private Eye apologist, conceded that credit for the exposure belonged largely to 'Mr. Foot who waged the campaign, and Private Eye which carried the fruits of his researches and ran the financial risks.' Times, May 1974.

and often challenged in what may be called the new 'community press'.

B. COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS.

Many organisations and groups have taken advantage of the offset lithographic printing technique, developed in the sixties, to produce their own paper. It has meant that for the first time modest publications for limited circulation can be attractively produced at comparatively low cost. A further advantage is that the publishers themselves can determine its layout.

1. Types of Paper.

Several cities have an 'alternative' paper, characterized by a campaigning populist stance. It is likely to proclaim left-wing (though non-party) political views and claim to publish 'News you're not supposed to know' (Liverpool Free Press), or to provide 'a radical alternative perspective on local events' (Aberdeen Peoples Press). Typically, its survival will depend on the sustained dedication of a few people (often university based): 'some have no advertisements, others have small ones from shops, etc. They usually manage to break even, but don't often support anyone' (Uncareers 1974). Among its

establishment targets will be the town hall, big business firms, and the city newspapers. For example, Grapevine (Birmingham, December 1973) reported on the 'not surprisingly little published grip by the Birmingham Post and Mail Group Ltd. on the daily and weekly printed word : a grip which is now stretching to the airwaves of Commercial Radio Birmingham'[6].

The most successful venture in establishing an alternative local paper has been the West Highland Free Press (launched April 1972), with a current circulation of 7,500. One of its preoccupations has been the effect of oil related development on rural Scotland. Described by its business manager as "first and foremost a local weekly newspaper but with a much more radical political content",[7] it claims to be the only local paper registered in the U.K. Press Directory which lists its politics as 'socialist'.

Community papers are as diverse as the groups which produce them. They usually rely on voluntary enthusiasm and are non-profitmaking, so that there is a high turnover rate. 'Some have been running for years, others have appeared in response to an immediate local need and disappeared when that need was met' (Community Action : April/May 1974). Most do not shrink

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6 Newspaper holdings (ordinary or voting shares) in the first five commercial radio companies stood, at June 1973:-

London Broadcasting	18 %
Capital	32 %
Birmingham	21 %
Manchester	33 %
Clyde	32 % (Press Council 1974).

The Independant Broadcasting Authority hope to have 19 stations operating by the end of 1975.

7 quoted, Scotsman, 15.7.74 (Done, K. 'Red Road Through the Isles'). In addition to delivering broadsides against oil companies the paper features golden weddings and the shinty results.

from challenging local government actions (or inaction) and combine freely comment with news.

The paper may represent an interest group rather than a locality as such, with the purpose of drawing attention to a particular issue : conservation, or welfare provision, for example. Others, often inspired by professional people (social workers, planners and churchmen) cover a council estate or similar definable neighbourhood with the object of 'community development'. The local authority will welcome some of these although groups more overtly political and committed to confrontation may be treated circumspectly.[8] Long standing resident or tenant associations may feel least need to produce their own broadsheet. Having built up contacts within the authority they know that they will be consulted on matters affecting their interests.

As yet a distinction exists between community papers (home-based and concerned with government) and alternative industrial publications (work-based and concerned with industry). Produced by the committed left these have emerged from a dissatisfaction with the almost total concern of traditional trade union papers with pay negotiations and productivity deals.

The reasons for this division are not hard to find. While trade unionism has been traditionally a working class activity, it is the professional middle class, and housewives who have espoused 'community action'. Industrial papers are produced for workers by groups who have always seen the

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8 The Save Piccadilly Campaign used to complain that Westminster Council would have nothing to do with them. Recently a report by the City engineer recommending pedestrianisation of part of Rupert Street was the result of talks between council and S.P.C.

'point of production' - factories - as the place where organisation for change must take place.

2. Planning and Community Action.

In the late sixties, it was in the field of planning that signs of a breakdown in communication between local government and governed first appeared. Not only did people affected by plans feel that they were given insufficient information but that it was information of the wrong sort. Dennis (1972) showed that in a redevelopment area residents wanted reassurance about their future within a social structure they knew. The planners on the other hand stressed the need for 'rational' communication, based on 'facts' about the state of the houses, the timetable for renewal, and so on. Hill (1974) suggests that the language in which communication takes place only reinforces this gap of understanding; 'the planners use 'jargon', the residents make unthinking repetitive assertions. The dialogue is misleading.'

The commercial press has not filled this communication vacuum. Cox and Morgan (1973) found that two types of political event were reported by the local paper: the taking of a decision of community-wide significance (for instance, town centre redevelopment); and, secondly, the occasional 'breakdown' in the system (typically, strikes). In their reporting of local politics, these papers form a link in the vertical chain of communication from government to people. The new community press aims to develop horizontal links within the community, and to strengthen the voice

of the governed. It is concerned less with political 'events' than with political process (how decisions are made, local authority procedures, and so on).

The monthly magazine, Community Action, attempts to widen the communication network further. It sees community self-help as the first step to changing national policies, but identifies the struggle to obtain information as the main threat to local action.[9] This it aims to provide through reports of the activities and experiences of community groups, and by features containing practical information (for example, on how to present a case at a public inquiry). The magazine was started in February, 1972, by young planners at the G.L.C., some of whom had been working with David Eversley on the revised written statement of the Greater London Development Plan. He wrote later that the magazine was 'excellent in parts but dedicated to the main proposition that our style of government (with participation actually encouraged from the governors) was wrong' (Eversley, 1973b). Present circulation is about 5,000.

3. Public participation and the 'liberal veto'.

The Skeffington report (1969) has been widely criticised for its political naivity. Certainly groups according with the aims of Community Action reject the Skeffington approach to participation, with its emphasis on educating the public in

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9 'Our aim is to help action groups by providing a forum for the exchange of news information, ideas and experience as well as offering analysis of the machinations of government ..... By drawing together local issues and analysing them, it will be possible to suggest new national policies and ways of making them effective.'

Community Action No. 1 Feb.1972.

environmental matters; and on consultation as a means of reducing conflict prior to the implementation of plans. In particular, they would deny the proposition that public involvement in goal setting is unnecessary in this country, where aims are 'implicit and accepted'.

In England, the Association for Neighbourhood Councils (formed 1970) continues to press for the creation of a nationwide system of elected councils. North of the border 'community councils' are to be officially encouraged and recognised.[10]

In some quarters fears have been expressed that such measures threaten the whole rationale of representative local government. Hill (1974) warns of the danger of the 'liberal veto' once power shifts from the inner world of the council and the party to the public arena of press, planners, and pressure groups: 'Although this can be beneficial to those involved it is inevitably sectional and, as ever, the poor areas are not heard in the middle-class clamour'. It may well be that these councils will merely amplify the noise coming from already vociferous communities.

Skeffington called for community forums and community development officers. Plowden (1967) and Seebohm (1968) recommended community schools and community workers. Since these reports, numerous voluntary and government-backed projects have been undertaken in 'deprived' areas. The dilemma of community

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10 The Scottish Development Department (1974) sees two roles for the community council: to represent the views and need of the community to public authorities; and to organise action within the community.

workers of all kinds is that they are self-appointed (often professional and middle class) representatives of 'poor' communities. By offering an area its own news they may help promote a shared consciousness, will, and voice. The community paper can be seen as a third, distinct and important 'tier' of the local press.

In April Teach Yourself Books are to publish "Into Print : A Guide to Non-Commercial Newspapers and Magazines", by three Cambridge students who founded Stop Press. Inter-Action, the north London Community Art Trust directed by Ed Berman (of Save Piccadilly fame) is compiling its own report on the basis of a questionnaire sent to all known community papers.

Whether the alternative press will continue to flourish with increasing local government responsiveness, the general relaxing of development pressures, and steeply rising costs of production remains an open question. Given the monopoly position of the typical local paper, with its heavy dependence on local advertising, there is clearly a place for the more rigorous and discriminating approach to the reporting of local affairs which the better community papers provide.

CHAPTER 4 : LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE PRESS

A. LOCAL GOVERNMENT SENSITIVITY.

In 1974 local government in England and Wales was more than usually sensitive. By November, David Peshek[1] was describing local authority/press relations in parts of the north in terms of 'breakdown'. He attributed this rift to the cumulative effect of the aftermath of the Poulson affair, local government reorganisation, the rates explosion and the payment of allowances to councillors. Rightly or wrongly, he wrote, 'on all these matters local government feels itself to be vulnerable' (Local Government Chronicle (L.G.C.) 8.11.74).

1. Corruption.

Poulson was jailed for seven years, in March 1974. The trials of those implicated by his activities continued throughout the year. Police investigations were reported in many parts of the north of England, in South Wales, and in the south-west. In April a Royal Commission was set up to examine 'problems of conflict of interest and the risk of corruption involving favourable treatment from a public body'. Shortly afterwards a special inquiry, into conduct in local government, issued its report.[2] Among its recommendations was the registering of certain interests by councillors, chief officers and their deputies.

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1 Editor of Municipal Review, the journal of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities.

2 Report of the Prime Minister's Committee on Local Government. Rules of Conduct, Vol. Cmnd. 5636. The inquiry, under Redcliffe Maud, had been appointed by Mr. Heath in October, 1973.

The report, while concluding that the 'standards of local government are generally high', drew attention to the opportunities for corruption created by large scale planning, citing especially the involvement of councils in the business of comprehensive redevelopment.[3]

Pending the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the government (August 1974) asked local authorities to urgently consider their arrangements for review of internal procedures, for investigating complaints, for pursuing 'vigorous' policies of public communication, and for restricting outside work by council employees.

2. Reorganisation.

Local government reorganisation was already subject to heavy criticism before coming into effect. Many were disappointed at the continuance of a rural-urban division, while the London experience of a two-tier metropolitan government was not encouraging. Under the headline 'New councils on the chopping block' (Guardian, 14.1.75), John Ardill reviewed criticisms of the 'reformed' system. The most encouraging aspect - the move within many authorities toward corporate management - had a limited general news value.

3. Rate Increases.

The public image of local government has been tarnished further by charges made against the background of high

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3 At his trial, it was revealed that Dan Smith, either personally or through his contacts, had approached over two hundred local councils to try to win work for Poulson.

inflation and central government restriction on public spending. Soaring rate increases meant that local government finance became an issue in the election of October 1974, and subsequently the subject of a Royal Commission. As the rumblings of public discontent mounted, the press (national and local) carried stories of overstaffing by new authorities, and, in some instances, of staff being overpaid. In January 1975 the government announced that there was to be an examination into the first of these allegations, in the form of a questionnaire to all old and new authorities. One headline in the News of the World ran: "Its a Pay Bonanza on the Rates". The Local Government Chronicle was not amused: "When the British popular press carries stories about local government you stand a good chance of seeing journalism at its worst" (L.G.C. 6.12.74). If the press wants to be treated responsibly, it concluded, it must behave responsibly.

The accommodation of the new authorities also made headlines. A survey carried out by a Leicester local paper found 97% of townspeople were opposed to the council's scheme to buy a £6 million office building (Times, 27.2.75).

4. Members' Allowances.

Finally, there has been the question of members' allowances. These were introduced under the Local Government Act, 1972, whereby, at the discretion of the authority, councillors might claim up to £10 a day for 'approved duties'. This attendance allowance is distinct from travel and subsistence expenses already

chargeable. Many councillors were opposed to these payments. Before long, however, there were stories in the press of the system being abused. The Telegraph reported that councillors attending a free dinner given by their authority were claiming the maximum £10 allowance for doing so. Controversy surrounded the definition of approved duty. East Sussex were reported as paying members for attending a party group summoned solely to discuss council and committee agenda. Some authorities were allowing councillors on school governing bodies to claim for these meetings. It was announced that yet another government inquiry would be set up to examine the workings of the new system.

Where the press came in for criticism was that often stories revealed an ignorance of the law. Peshek commented on the 'pitiful failure' in some reports to distinguish between the new attendance allowance and the traditional expenses(L.G.C.19.7.74). This meant a distorted evaluation of the total claims submitted.

B. LOCAL AUTHORITY/PRESS RELATIONS.

The Bains report (August 1972) stressed the need to inform the public about the new local government system. Many authorities in England and Wales were toying with public relations for the first time when the switch occurred (April 1, 1974). About half had full time public relations officers (or the equivalent) or

had made provision for such an appointment (Hollins, 1974).

1. Public Relations Officers.

Most of these have two sides to their work. The first is to publicise the authority's services and activities, the second to handle queries from press and public. 'We act for members as spokesman, for the council as informant' is how one G.L.C. press officer put it: 'for us efficiency is the number of favourable stories in newspapers about the G.L.C.'.

The P.R.O.'s role is often ill defined. His allegiance is to the council, which in the last resort must mean the majority group. Yet some things may be kept from him deliberately, or he may be used as a buffer against the press, as is the case with those councils which insist that all inquiries be channeled through the P.R. system.

Only a handul of authorities have given their P.R.O.'s chief officer status. If he is a member of the management team his voice will be heard before decisions are taken. A good P.R. system can save the journalist time and the frustration of being passed around the internal telephone system of the authority. It is not a substitute for what Bains called 'an outgoing and positive attitude' on the part of the elected members and officers. In the 1960s the drive for better local authority public relations came from the National Association of Local Government Officers (N.A.L.G.O.). Since 1968, however, the Union has turned almost exclusively to Trade Union and economic matters. The Local

Government Act, 1972, attempted to provide a legislative framework for more open government. One of its provisions was to give press and public the right of access to all meetings of full committees.

2. Admission of Press to Committees.

Closed committees became an issue during the 1959 provincial newspapers' strike when Labour controlled city councils, in sympathy with the demands of the striking printing workers, refused to supply information to papers which continued to produce emergency editions. The ban was total since under the Local Authorities (Admission of the Press to Meetings) Act of 1908, reporters could be excluded from the monthly council meeting if members formally resolved that this was in the public interest. The 1960 Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act introduced a minimum legislative code of practice. It opened up full council meetings, the Education committee (of little significance since most work is done in subcommittees) and committees on which all members of the council sat (unlikely in authorities of any size). The impact of the code on relations between local authorities and newspapers was marginal. These depend not on legislation but on attitudes and since the public and press could be excluded 'whenever publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest' councils were able to continue much as before. Maud (1967b) found that only 10% admitted the press to every main committee, while 50% excluded the press from all of them. Notorious were

the London boroughs: only three allowed the press into any committees (other than Education).

The Local Government Act, 1972, (operative 1 April, 1974) has opened all committees (but not subcommittees) to public and press. A resolution to hold part of the proceedings in camera must be made at the particular meeting, rather than for periods up to a year ahead as was the case previously.

Attitudes to publicity are changing but slowly and not uniformly. Devon, for example, has opened all its sub-committees to the public while Stockport has resolved that generally 'the press should be allowed to remain for confidential items, but on the understanding that they will not report them' (Municipal Review, November 1974). On the other hand 'when the planning committee of the London borough of Richmond held its first meeting with reporters, and some public, the first major debate was whether planning applications should be discussed in public. It was decided that they should be dealt with in secret session' (U.K. Press Gazette, 11.2.74).

The U.K. Press Gazette, the journalists' trade paper, has drawn up a black list of authorities. These included (mid 1974) Lancashire, Coventry and several councils in the southwest and home counties.

In May both the Municipal Journal and the Local Government Chronicle[4] appealed to authorities to adhere to the spirit rather than the letter of the law. The L.G.C. observed

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4 These are competing weekly journals for local government and the public services. Since the winding up of the Local Government Information Office (early 1974) the three associations representing county councils, metropolitan authorities and district councils have lacked a single voice.

that many authorities were 'still seeking to keep things secret' (editorial, 17.5.74) through non-notification of meetings, through large numbers of subcommittees from which the press were excluded, and by resolving a high proportion of matters to be 'confidential', and so reserved for private session.

3. Press Reporting of Local Government.

Much of the friction between press and local authorities results from both parties being convinced that they are the one with the real grievance (Burke, 1974). Peshek (1975) says that many people in local government overlook the fact that it is the job of a newspaper to sell copies, not to be a broadsheet on behalf of the council. The Maud committee found that "not all members to whom we spoke appeared to appreciate the inevitable disparity of goals between their council or political party and the local newspaper" (Maud, 1967b). That this misunderstanding persists is apparent in the evidence to the Royal Commission on the Press from the Association of Metropolitan Authorities. They suggest that councils should be given editorial space in local newspapers to balance the new powers which the press has to cover committee meetings.[5] Tension is most likely to occur when a Labour council suspects a Tory bias in the local paper.

Cox and Morgan (1973) found that in Liverpool when councillors and officers complained of press coverage it was usually on the grounds of misreporting, triviality, or lack of

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5 'In view of specific and onerous responsibilities placed on local authorities by statute, the association feels that a corresponding responsibility should be accepted by the press' (quoted, Times, 19.1.75).

publicity for public spirited work being done.

Checks on the first of these - misreporting - include the laws of libel and the standards of the Press Council, the newspaper industry's 'public relations' department. Founded in 1953 (against considerable journalist opposition) this body investigates complaints against newspapers and reporters. In the twelve months up to June 1973, the council received 420 complaints. It adjudicated on thirty-four of these, upholding twenty (Press Council, 1974). Although 'somewhat ineffective', the Association of County Councils considers the Council 'almost certainly an important factor in curbing irresponsible action and ensuring responsible journalism'.[6]

The charges of triviality and lack of coverage relate to the newspapers' concept of the newsworthiness of local government. Cox and Morgan argue that young journalists learn to act on premises which stem from popular perceptions of local government and from the nature of the material they are handling. One of these premises is that local government is dull, and that reporting it is a matter of civic duty rather than natural inclination. It seems most papers believe that they publish more news about local government than reader demand justifies. A story dismissed as trivial by the council may appear to the local reporter as a creditable attempt to 'spice up' an unpromising item of council 'news'. The image of dullness may be reinforced by the way in which local government news is presented. In Liverpool

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6 Evidence to the Royal Commission on the Press. quoted Guardian, 29.11.74.

apart from a front page 'splash' on a current controversy, local politics generally appeared in the form of snippets distributed throughout the news pages. Coverage of services often centred on some eruption in council or committee, the reporting of which was likely to be highly personalised. 'Little wonder, therefore, that perceptions of local government activity are idiosyncratic and fragmented.' (Cox and Morgan, 1973). Local political news is presented 'raw' in most papers (especially the weeklies), and facts divorced from context, and without interpretation do not mean much.

Despite all - including local radio - the press remains the most important source of local government news to electors. The Maud Committee (1967a) found that 79% of their survey claimed to read at least one local paper regularly. A further 10% read one irregularly. Although only 30% remembered hearing any council news in the previous month, 68% of these cited the press as their information source.

C. THE PRESS AND PLANNING.

1. Public Participation.

Since Maud, the pressure for a greater say in the day-to-day decisions of a local authority has intensified. The debate has so far been dominated by planning, as groups and individuals have challenged decisions which cumulatively meant the

destruction of a familiar environment. Dennis (1972) demonstrated the implications of the control of information by officers - not, it should be noticed, planning committees - in urban redevelopment. In Sunderland, the individual learnt too little, too late of the council's intentions. Councillors themselves, with only partial information, were reluctant to challenge the professional planners.

Some councils - and newspapers - are responding to the demand for more information. A north Devon councillor argued that planning applications were of so much interest "that it is probably better to spend money advertising them than to pay for some of the roadwidening schemes which get approved" (Western Morning News, 17.9.74). The council rejected the motion.

While there is no general statutory requirement that planning applications be publicly advertised - exceptions include 'bad neighbour' developments and proposals affecting a conservation area - many editors consider these of general concern, and include lists of applications on the news pages. A survey in May/June 1974 carried out by the building research department on behalf of the Dobry committee found that full application lists from 36% of an unspecified number of district planning authorities were published by at least one local paper, and selected applications from a further 43% (Dobry, 1975).

As far as broader planning activity is concerned, the desirability of public involvement was statutorily recognised in the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act. One of Skeffington's recommendations was that 'local planning authorities should

concentrate their efforts on the local press as a main medium for the dissemination of their proposals' (Skeffington, 1969). A problem arises over the publicising of plans in this way. Who should present the proposals? The early experience of structure planning suggests that 'many planners do not quite know how to use newspapers for publicity purposes' (Stringer-Plumridge, 1974). The cheapest and easiest solution is to leave coverage to the press. The quality of presentation then depends not only upon the space, and other constraints on the paper (such as the ability of its journalists), but on the day to day relations between the press and the authority - both councillors and planning officers.

Full and considered reporting has been encouraged in several ways: articles written for journalists to draw on, working lunches with editors,& press conferences. Some newspapers have taken the initiative themselves. One in Lancashire sponsored a series of three public meetings and a seminar for councillors in connection with the North East Lancashire Advisory Plan.

An alternative is for the planning team to produce a special supplement. It could be written either by the planners or by a journalist, but distribution, unless it is through a local newspaper, can be expensive.

What has emerged is that however it is presented, a structure plan does not capture the public imagination. A sample survey in East Sussex indicated that while approximately

75% of the 20,000 households in the area bought a copy of local newspapers containing a four page colour supplement on the plan, only 28% of households one month later remembered seeing the supplement, and only 6% had any recollection of its contents (Stringer and Plumridge, 1974). A greater interest may be expected, from press and public, in the preparation of local plans.

2. Councillor, official and journalist.

The concentration in the participation debate on planning - and the related local authority fields of housing and transport - may be unfortunate. Brian Styles (1971) has suggested that it might have been better to see participation as an issue of government - the shaping and sharing of power - and not of planning at all. It is the adequacy of representation that has been challenged.

One consequence is that in many places the chief planning officer has emerged as a political figure in his own right. Cox and Morgan (1973) found that the news editor of the Liverpool Post and Echo, while denying that the city was run by a small group of people, was prepared to single out the planning officer and his successors as being officials playing a notable role in changing the city. It is not surprising that individuals, organisations and the press, wanting information on a particular issue, bypass the councillor and approach the full-time official whose job it is to know about such things. According to

Simon Jenkins (1972a) it is fast becoming a journalistic commonplace that it is a waste of time getting in touch with a councillor. He is not directly involved at a day-to-day level with the problem at issue, and will probably ask if he can 'ring you back later' when he has spoken to his official advisors. Jenkins asks, "why not go straight to the advisors and save everyone the time and bother?"

The involvement of officials with the public depends on the attitude of the local authority. This applies both to the extent of contact with local opinion in plan-making and to their formal accessibility to the press. Councillors will be jealous of their position as elected leaders of the community. That this role is upheld by the way council news is reported is likely to be important to them. An Islington councillor objected strongly to a reference in the local paper to the planning sub-committee '..... currently considering a rubber stamp application for a change of use'. He wrote denying that applications were ever rubber stamped (Islington Gazette, 9.8.74).

To some extent the journalist on the local paper collaborates with councillors, at the acquiescence of the officials in sustaining the myth of representative might. By restricting coverage of local politics to debates in the council chamber, the press conceals the political power of the official. Once this is recognised the credibility of councillors is diminished.

It seems that the attitude of many councillors to the

press is ambiguous. They want publicity for the work of the authority, and for their part in it, but they want publicity of the right sort. In effect, this means coverage of the public face of the authority, what is decided, what is being done, but not reports of its internal workings and power structure. Members are conscious of their vulnerability, as the complexity of local government increases. Understandably, they feel that they should know of their authority's plans before reading about them in the local paper. As one councillor remarked to Hill (1970), 'the press want to know what we are going to do next week or next month, and we are telling them what we did last week or three months ago.'

In 1974 most criticisms of the commercial press made by councillors were on the familiar grounds of misreporting (for example, members' allowances), sensationalism (the rates explosion), and lack of publicity for council achievements (including management restructuring). Such criticism is not fundamental. What many councillors do not want is a press which while remedying these deficiencies is able to fulfill the aspirations of the 'alternative' paper: a local press which probes deeper, analyses the mechanisms of the authority, uncovers its inefficiencies, and (on occasion) exposes its corrupt practices. It may be, as Cox and Morgan suggest, that all in all the continuance of the present system is not a bad bargain for many local politicians.

CHAPTER 5 : THE BARNET PRESS

The Barnet Press (B.P.) is a weekly paper, circulating in north London and south Hertfordshire. This chapter looks at the paper's attitude towards local government, and at the tensions between them. The basis of the study is an examination of one year's issues (1974) supplemented by conversations with newspaper staff.

A. INTRODUCTION.

1. Circulation Area.

The paper's circulation area (illustrated) has a population of about 120,000, of which one third live in Hertfordshire. The focus of the B.P. is High Barnet, a former coaching town on the Great North Road, now a predominantly middle class dormitory suburb of London, at the end of the Northern line of the Underground. Other centres served by the paper are Potters Bar and New Barnet, which were both developed around stations on the main railway line into Kings Cross. Potters Bar (population c. 25,000) is physically self-contained in the Hertfordshire green belt. New Barnet, in the south, has attracted office development for firms moving out from London. The area also includes several favoured commuter villages in the green belt. There is little industry.

2. Local Government.

The parliamentary constituency consistently returns a Conservative M.P. At the borough elections in May the area (five

wards) returned thirteen Conservatives, one Labour and one Independent. This compared with an overall 2 : 1 Conservative/ Labour ratio for the borough as a whole.

Since local government reorganisation the paper has been concerned with two authorities: the Borough of Barnet (1965) and from April 1974, the Hertsmere District of Hertfordshire (illustrated). This has made news-collecting easier, as these have replaced six councils. After nine years, however, there is still resentment in Barnet (shared by the newspaper) at the transfer of local government offices to Hendon, the centre of the borough.[1] The borough hall is five miles by road, and lacks a direct public transport link with the town. As one reporter said, 'people in Barnet or Potters Bar never go to Hendon'.[2] With its offices in the High Street and its windows available for displays by the town's organisations, the Barnet Press is local in a way that the Borough of Barnet is not.

3. The Barnet Press.

The B.P. is unusual in that it is still published by the family firm which launched it in 1859. This now owns three papers, all produced from its original site in High Barnet. The B.P. has no direct competition and, with a different front page for its Potters Bar edition, sells about 26,000 copies a week.

If the distinctions drawn at the national level are applicable, the B.P. is a 'quality' local paper, with the emphasis

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1 An informal dinner is arranged annually for councillors and officials serving the old Barnet Urban Council at the time of its demise.

2 Hendon has its own paper (part of the ubiquitous Westminster Group), which with two localised editions, has a circulation of 29,000. Four other newspaper groups have papers circulating within the borough.

firmly on informing rather than titillating. There are few court reports and those published are given little prominence. Sub editing is stringent (the Council always 'are'; the press has a capital 'P'), with the result that reporting appears uniform. The consequences of private ownership are sometimes curious, for example, the paper does not report wills (although these are public knowledge), nor divorces. It was suggested that the proprietor (granddaughter of the founder) might prefer it not to report murders either. This cultivated sobriety is further reflected in the way stories are presented - in the housing field, policies and political debate are the norm, and the focussing on a personal angle exceptional. The paper contains little comment or interpretation. There is only a "diary" (informal but non-controversial), the occasional feature article, and (usually) an editorial. According to the editor, the strength of the paper is its reputation: the Barnet Press is told things which might be withheld from a less established paper.

Local papers vary from week to week both in size and content. In 1974, the B.P. averaged about forty pages, of which the front, most of the back and seven to ten inside pages carried news stories. In total, an issue would contain between four and six hundred column inches of news. Typically, one third of the paper was made up of advertisements. The amount of reader correspondence varied; sometimes there were thirty or more letters: once, in August, there were only two. The holiday

season had another effect - an increase in the proportion of feature writing as against news reporting. The B.P.Group employed a total staff of about one hundred and forty. Of these 27 were journalists, 12 of them on the Barnet Press.

B. LOCAL AUTHORITY / PRESS RELATIONS.

1. The Paper and Local Government.

Like most local papers the Barnet Press is politically independent. At the local level the editor had little time for party politics: 'I cannot see that it matters who provides kerbstones', a common sense stance explicit in an editorial on the 'poaching' of Barnet land by an inner London borough: 'Whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue it seems childish that two responsible local authorities should bicker over a piece of land. Surely the two councils can get together and settle the matter amicably.' (editorial, 28.6.74).

Early in the year, the B.P. urged the people of Potters Bar to campaign for a parish council, despite the failure of their council to support a petition to that end. The paper was not enthusiastic about the prospects of better government with bigger authorities. In May, there was the borough election. "There were no surprises in the number of people who turned out to vote .... the figure generally confirmed once again that people are apathetic towards local elections" (10.5.74).

Of primary interest was the return of one independent,

the candidate of a ward association, with a mandate to improve communications between town hall and electors in the northern end of the borough. ("The borough is so large and the town hall is so remote especially for Barnetonians.") He did not believe in party politics in local government, and the paper, clearly sympathetic, greeted his election as 'clear approval of the association's belief that the voters' (alias readers of the B.P.?) 'want a leavening of non-party representatives on the council'.

The 'occasions' of local government were fully reported, in particular the mayoral election, again in May. The paper carried a picture-feature on the new mayor and his wife, a report of his civic reception speech, plus sixteen column inches on the first meeting of the new council. Later in the year there were lengthy reports on the borough's tenth anniversary dinner attended by the ten mayors, and on the annual civic banquet.

2. Local Authority Public Relations.

This might suggest relations between paper and council were mutually satisfactory. They were not. The incoming mayor criticised the borough's press in his first speech: 'Our local newspapers give good coverage but I suggest many of their readers would like to know more about the positive achievements rather than the defects. It is most usually faults that get headlines in the newspapers, not successes.' (quoted 17,5.74). He urged editors to help instil a greater sense of civic consciousness in the borough.

According to the B.P. the fault lay with the politicans: 'The council do a lot of good work and they do have many successes but if the relevant information is hidden behind walls of impenetrable secrecy it is impossible to tell the story of what is being done' (editorial, 24.5.74).

This lack of self-publicity was a popular charge from the Labour minority on the council. At the beginning of the year, three months ahead of the legislation, the council opened some of its committees to the press and public. Four remained closed, however, including the crucial policy advisory committee, as did all sub-committees. Even at open committees, matters could always be left till part II (closed session) at the discretion of members. A decision by the public works committee to keep over for secret session discussion on proposals to recycle rubbish, disturbed even some Conservative councillors: 'every week we see in the Press comments from dissatisfied ratepayers. People just think the council are doing nothing. There has been no publicity' (quoted, B.P. 7.6.74).

Reflecting on the effect of opening committees, the editor did not think that the gesture had made much difference to information flow. It was the borough's public relations that were at fault. He cited the case of a 'beautiful' new old folks home, built by the council and recently brought to his attention. At the time the B.P. had been told nothing so no publicity was possible.

The borough had a press department consisting of a cheif press officer, his assistant, four information/press officers and two secretaries.[3] The editor of the B.P. had no criticism of the department as such, except that it was 'rather rigidly controlled'. He contrasted the borough's undue secrecy with the excellent information service provided by Hertfordshire County Council.

Hertsmere did not appoint a press officer. The policy and resources committee decided, in April, to put certain useful information in the rate demand and to produce a news letter.

3. Access to officers.

Not only, as the paper saw, did the council fail to advertise itself sufficiently, but it obstructed the press from obtaining clarification on specific matters. Reporters were not allowed direct access to council officers.

In September, a lead story recorded a decision by the general purposes committee to lift this ban. An editorial heralded it as 'a wonderful opportunity to achieve closer and better informed links with the council' (editorial 13.9.74). Two months later, newspapers in the borough received a letter from the Town Clerk. It drew attention to a rider added in secret session of a subsequent meeting, affording direct access 'provided that the officers concerned may if they so desire request that any press inquiries should be channelled through the council's Press and

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3 In May it was announced that the chief press officer was leaving (after five years). By the end of 1974 the post had been vacant for five months although his successor had been appointed: the deputy editor of the Barnet Press.

Information Services'. This had been interpreted by the papers that officers might decline to speak on a particular issue, or at a particular time. The letter concluded however: that officers 'have unanimously agreed that they do so request, and that inquiries should be made as before' (quoted B.P. 8.11.74). The general ban was restored, making Barnet, as the B.P. pointed out, the odd one out among the London boroughs.[4] The irritant to the local papers was the delay involved in a system whereby press inquiries were channelled through the town clerk and press officers to the officials involved. In April, the diary section noted that a reply had been received from the Press department to a query phoned fourteen weeks previously. In response to several inquiries, the B.P. had been told that the matter was 'in the pipeline' (diary, 12.4.74).

Of the other sensitive issues for local government in 1974, only the question of officers' salaries embarrassed press relations, but at the national rather than local level. The Labour group in the council challenged (correctly) the proposed new salaries as exceeding those recommended by the Joint Negotiating Committee for Council Officers of Local Authorities. Although reported without comment in the Barnet Press, the story was taken up by the nationals, including three separate mentions in John Torode's "Londoner's Diary" in the Guardian (November 1974).[5]

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4 Contrast Camden, for example. In 1965 the P.R.O. '..... took over the job of issuing press releases but the press still had access to individual departments for information.' (Wistrich, 1972).

5 Most journalists have private arrangements with national dailies. A story is paid for on a lineage basis.

On the equally delicate issue of whether both Barnet and Hertsmere should proceed with expensive plans to build civic centres, the paper again reserved comment.

4. Conclusions.

The main impression gained was of a sense of frustration. If, as one editorial suggested, council and media share a common objective, to explain matters of public interest and importance then "there is no reason for an 'opposite camps' attitude to exist". As for the borough council, many members, and certainly the town clerk, mistrusted the press. (The borough, it should be remembered, was not dealing with the Barnet Press alone.) A diary piece (5.4.74) good-humouredly described how press and public were 'squeezed in' a small corner of committee rooms: 'their view of the proceedings is restricted to what little they can see by peering through the small gaps between councillors' high back chairs ..... It now seems committee members are doing their best to remain as anonymous as possible'.

C. PLANNING COVERAGE.

1. Content.

It is not easy to define a 'planning story'. In the Barnet Press there appeared to be six broad categories, and the comparative coverage given to each is set out in Table 6. This does not claim to be infallible; some items will have been

TABLE 6.

Barnet Press : Planning Coverage 1974.

Subject	Stories (number)	Column Inches	Letters (number)	Editorials (number)
Development Control	131	1,154	32	3
Housing Policy	72	609	27	2
Roads & Traffic	63	458	36	4
Local Authority Plans	57	696	16	4
Conservation (built environment)	48	363	1	-
Recreation/Country-side	42	303	c.22	2

missed, others perhaps misplaced. Only one group of stories, involving an application to demolish a listed building, appears in more than one category. What it does demonstrate, however, is the importance attached by the paper to development pressures on the area. Moreover, as is explained below, the table includes only development control issues identified by the paper as controversial, or likely to be so. The second most important category in terms of number of stories was housing policy, although the making and content of local plans took up more space. If letters to the paper are an indication of the priorities of the community, then roads and traffic problems were of first concern.

The paper could afford no specialist planning staff, although senior reporters were put onto stories such as green belt appeals. A brief look (in summary form) at the type of stories included under each classification will indicate the quality of coverage.

2. Types of stories.

(a) Development Control.

Recognising a wide concern over certain planning applications, and especially 'infilling', the paper had for some years published in its news pages lists of selected applications. These are not included in the totals of Table 6, or in Table 7.

The largest proportion of stories concerned proposed developments in the green belt. Obviously most of these involved

Hertsmere rather than the borough.

Other issues (Table 7) included the effects of a newly opened stall market, the siting of a home for ex-prisoners, demolition of houses for a road-widening scheme, and 'the great unkindness of putting elderly people into a home built on land that had been a burial ground'. (Borough councillor). Obviously newsworthy, was an enforcement order served on a retarded children's home which, without planning permission, had built a swimming pool, in a conservation area, and 'detrimental to the amenities of neighbouring houses'.

An inconclusive correspondence debated the merits of development control. What harm would it do to anyone, wrote one woman, 'if an extra room is added to a property in extensive grounds with substantial front and rear gardens?' A reply from the chairman of the development and planning committee included details of how to appeal against a planning decision.

(b) Housing policy.

Less than 7% of stories in this category concerned Hertsmere.

A major issue was the borough's three year old policy (rescinded in October) of restricting the number of council houses to 20% of its total. Also controversial was the purchase by inner London boroughs of privately built housing in Barnet. The chairman of the housing committee of one of the offending authorities, Camden, was the parliamentary Labour candidate for the High Barnet area in both the February and October general elections. Most of

TABLE 7.

Barnet Press : Coverage of Development Control Issues 1974.

Local Authority	Application	Site/Location	Number of Stories	Column Inches	Number of Letters	Number of Editorials
Barnet	Offices	Underground station	1	12	2	1
	Old People's home	Chapel graveyard	3	42	1	
	Floodlights (football)	Residential area	3	28		
	School extension	Major road	4	40	1	
	Offices	Listed building	9	93		
	Stall market	Residential area	5	51		
	Housing (infill)	Residential area	3	21	1	
	Home for ex-prisoners	Residential area	3	50	1	
	Flats/ garages	London Transport land	2	11		
	Housing re-development/road widening		4	31		
	Civic Centre		4	71	2	
	Housing (various)	Green belt	4	37	1	
	Miscellaneous	-	31	234	1	
			77	738	10	1
Hertsmere	Shops/offices	)	1	5	4	1
	Mixed development	) mixed)	2	25	2	
	Swimming pool	Conservation/ residential area	2	28	2	
	G.L.C. housing	Home of Rest for Horses	3	17	1	
	Civic offices		2	22		
	Housing (various)	Green belt	15	163	6	1
	Miscellaneous	-	23	108	7*	
			48	368	22	2

* Planning delays/policy.

contd....

Table 7 contd.

Barnet Press : Coverage of Development Control Issues 1974.

Local Authority	Application	Site/Location	Number of Stories	Column Inches	Number of Letters	Number of Editorials
G.L.C.	Green belt policy	-	2	13		
Enfield			3	33		
Haringay			1	2		
			6	48	-	-
TOTAL			131	1154	32	3

the twenty two letters published were written by elected representatives, or candidates for election.

A Labour group attack on the activities of the chairman of Barnet's housing committee, in his private capacity as an estate agent, was taken up by Martin Walker in his 'Open File' column in the Guardian (1.5.74). The local paper continued reporting the story from council minutes and without comment.

(c) Roads and traffic.

Under this category were included items both on road planning and construction, and debate on traffic control and management schemes.

Approximately a quarter of the coverage concerned GLC/DOE strategic road building, and in particular the ongoing construction of a section of the London ring road dividing High Barnet from Potters Bar. Other stories concerned lorry traffic and congestion.

(d) Local authority plans.

At the beginning of the year Hertfordshire was completing its public involvement phase in compiling the report of survey for the county structure plan. Quite lengthy press releases were published verbatim.

In February, Barnet presented proposals for the centre of New Barnet, drawn up in conjunction with a development company which it was revealed had already acquired much property there. The subsequent political controversy was reported on the

news pages, and the issues debated in the correspondence columns. Six of thirteen letters published on the subject were written by one Labour ex-councillor.

By the end of the year even more items (20) had been written on progress in producing a local plan for the town centre of High Barnet.

(e) Conservation.

A glance at Table 6 will reveal that there were few conservation issues raised over this period. The only controversy surrounded the proposed demolition of an eighteenth century listed building and its replacement by a nine-storey office development with a supermarket below. (9 stories.)

A series of articles (1973) on the architecture of a conservation area was published in book form by the Barnet Press.

The paper gave publicity to the listing of buildings, and to improvement schemes, both public and private.

(f) Recreation and amenity/the countryside.[6]

Several letters debated the proper function of a G.L.C. country park, opened in 1973. Most correspondents protested against proposed sporting facilities which would intrude on the landscaped estate. News items included the ravages of Dutch Elm disease, and the cleaning up of local ponds.

A campaign for an arts centre was generously reported, as were local rumblings about the building of a swimming pool in a remote part of the borough; 'and a very bad bargain it is for most

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6 Table 6 excludes a weekly article by a nature correspondent.

Barnet residents', commented a feature writer (24.5.74).

3. News Sources.

The paper relied heavily on council releases and the minutes of committee meetings. Public inquiries, notably those concerning the green belt and historic buildings, were another source of planning news. About thirty local organisations, with environment interests, received coverage. Often this was simply a report of the annual general meeting.[7] These groups included Chamber of Commerce, Residents and Ratepayers Associations, local traffic organisations and amenity societies (Table 8).

The importance of a community having a public voice if its grievances are to be publicised is illustrated by a 1970 council estate, consisting of six hundred precast concrete homes and sited on the outskirts of High Barnet. Although there was a 'feeling' that the estate was deprived (it had no community hall, no bus service, etc.), the Barnet Press depended on individuals phoning through complaints to bring its problems to public attention. Even after a tenants' association was formed, the estate (which had not won local acceptance) and the newspaper (the voice of the traditional community) seemed for much of the time to ignore each other. Estate news was rare and indirect - for example, when a member spoke of its deficiencies in council. People on the estate did not use the paper's correspondence columns.

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7 Although few had as much as the twenty column inches given to the annual luncheon of Chipping Barnet Conservative Association women's divisional advisory committee.

TABLE 8.

Barnet Press : Community Organisations Featured in Planning Coverage 1974.

A1000 Action Group
After 6 Housing Trust
Arkley Association
Arkley Tenants Association
Barnet and District Local History Society
Barnet Centre Action Group
Barnet Chamber of Commerce
Barnet Society
Barnet Task Force
Beconsfield Road and District Amenities Association
Chipping Barnet Conservative Association
Chipping Barnet Labour Party
Chipping Barnet Town Centre Proposals Committee
Christian Enterprise Housing Association
Cuffley Ratepayers Association
Finchley and Whetstone Chamber of Commerce
Friern Barnet Ratepayers Association
Hadley Residents Association
Hadley Ward Residents Association
Mallard Close Residents Association
Mays Lane Action Group
Monken Hadley Commoners Association
Moxen Street Residents Association
New Barnet Residents Association
Park Road (High Barnet) Residents Association
Potters Bar Conservation Club
Potters Bar Friends of the Earth
Potters Bar Liberal Association
Potters Bar Society
Potters Bar Traffic Action Committee

continued.....

Table 8 contd.

Barnet Press : Community Organisations Featured in Planning Coverage 1974.

Ravensdale Area Residents Association

Shenley Village Association

South Herts Footpath Society

Totteridge Manor Association

Totteridge Ratepayers and Residents Association

Wood Street and Monken Hadley Conservation Area Advisory Committee

The basis of most development control stories were council minutes and public inquiries. Meetings and statements of societies in the green belt provided further copy. Housing policy issues, it has been demonstrated, were largely defined by party political stances. Items about roads and traffic, however, often stemmed from the activities of local groups. Of these, the most frequently publicised was the 'A1000 Group', an amalgamation of fifteen organisations campaigning for the statutory diversion from the town's High Street of all heavy traffic to the A.1. In the north of the area the 'Potters Bar Traffic Action Committee' monitored the effects of the building of the ring-road on local traffic patterns. Both groups used the correspondence columns to argue their cases.

The programmes and proposals of local authority planning were presented along with the reaction of interested parties to them. Usually these were reported separately and without comment. Early in the year the borough council had encouraged the formation of a consultative town centre proposals committee, made up of representatives of community groups in High Barnet. In June it decided to admit the B.P. to some of its meetings after internal criticism that there was insufficient publicity.[8]

Most conservation items were council releases, while recreation/countryside reports included both local authority policy

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8 The reply to this charge was the familiar apologia of all bodies of delegates: as comments were confidential until each association had discussed various matters and then reported back to the consultative committee very little information could be released to the press (B.P. 29.3.74).

statements, tree preservation orders, etc., and picture-features on the activities of weekend groups (for example, the cleaning out of ponds).

Throughout the year one local organization, the Hadley Ward Residents Association, consistently made news. Representing the town centre area of High Barnet the group had been formed in 1971 to try to improve communications with the town hall. The residents held regular meetings, had their own public relations officer, and succeeded in having one of their members elected to the borough council.[9] The vice-chairman of the town centre proposals committee was a member of the association, which also carried out a survey of 1,200 houses in the area and organized a conference to discuss planning priorities. Through petitions, and letters to the press and local authority, the association campaigned for various traffic management schemes, including that of the 'A1000 group'. This, the most active of all Barnet's organisations, claimed a membership of 850 (in a ward of twelve and a half thousand). Only 24 people attended the A.G.M. yet the body was 'flourishing' (according to the chairman) not least because of its excellent relations with the Barnet Press.

D. EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVE.

The editor's belief that there were always two sides to an argument was very apparent in the comment of the paper. On

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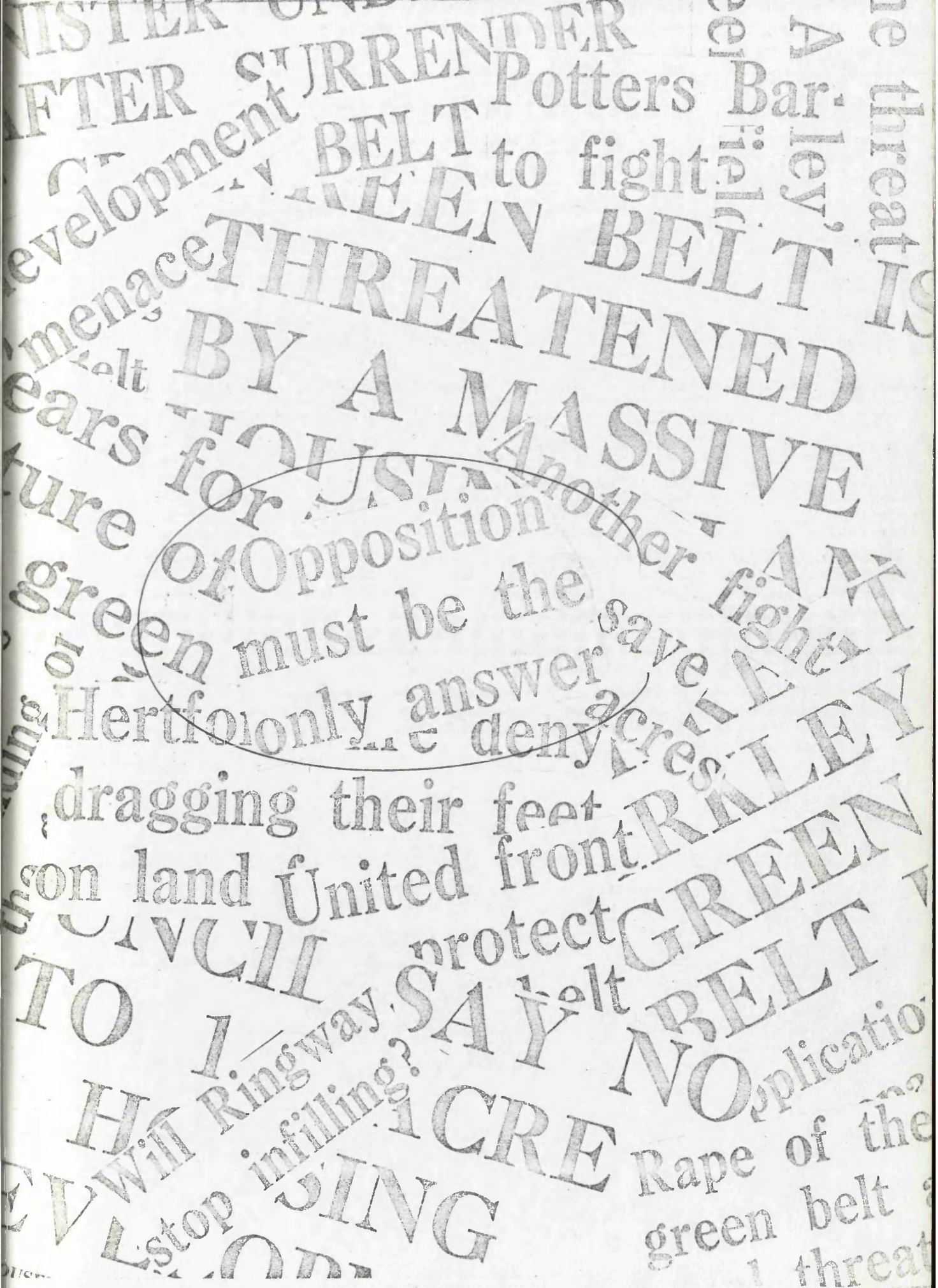
9 Compare, the Save Westminster Action Group who put up over twenty 'non-political' candidates in their borough. In Scotland, community councils are being encouraged to base representation on interest groups rather than party or location.

controversial matters, such as officers' salaries or the business activities of the housing committee chairman, the paper remained silent. The function of his paper was, said the editor, 'to give issues an airing'. Where, however, there was a conflict between the national and local interest it was the duty of the paper to take a local stand. This was most evident in its attitude to proposed development in the green belt.

As elsewhere, reportage and comment were kept separate but the vocabulary in both was martial: 'invasion threat', 'another battle....', 'joining forces ....', and the paper's stand was firm: 'the only answer to planning applications affecting the green belt is 'no' (editorial 5.7.74). In the last nine months of 1973, six editorials pushed home the message of resistance. By the turn of the year, over 500 acres of green belt land were the subject of planning applications. All had been refused by the authority concerned and several went to appeal. In November 1974, the leader of the borough council wrote appealing to B.P. readers to petition against a proposed development which the council were opposing at a forthcoming inquiry. At that time the only sizeable pieces of land that had been released was an eleven acre site adjoining a built-up area. The green belt, however, was seemingly not just an issue but a principle: 'once there is a large-scale breach in the defences it would be impossible to stop further development (editorial 24.8.73). The paper was confident that it reflected local feeling. Between April 1973 and March 1974



'Green belt' headlines: the Barnet Press

thirty letters were published on the subject, most of them taking the line of the Barnet Press.

Editorial comment was often prompted by letters: for example, the need for an early acceptable plan for New Barnet; the good work of the parks department; and the effects of the ring-road on local traffic patterns. The paper apparently looked to its correspondents to affirm the assumptions it made on what was (and what was not) in the local interest.[10] On occasions this was not forthcoming. An application for an office development over the tube station had been well publicised by the paper. The editor commented later on the 'surprising lack of response', and at the time was prompted to adopt an unusually firm stand, stating that "to encourage the creation of a second office 'centre' on the flanks of the town would be quite wrong" (editorial 14.6.74).

Sometimes the paper did criticise the council strongly on 'neutral' issues, taking up, for example, in two editorials the campaign of Hadley Ward residents association over the condition of the town's car park (12.7.74/29.11.74).

Equally, if it thought protest was unfounded, it said so. When Hertsmere council enclosed an area of parkland with an anti-vandal concrete fence several complaining letters were received. The paper was not sympathetic: "..... this proposal as well as a good many others was well publicised at the time." (editorial 27.12.74).

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10 "The correspondence column is seen by editors as a means of promoting reader participation and of obtaining useful guidelines about local opinion." (Jackson, I 1971)

Full support was given to attempts to involve the public in plan making. Separate articles over four weeks, and two editorials, advertised a council exhibition of the redevelopment of High Barnet: 'Public's chance to play full part in town centre planning' ran one headline. Working together was for the good of the town. According to one councillor this was 'the first real planning problem the council had put to the general public ..... And so far this has been an utterly peaceful (sic) process.' The Barnet Press recognised that complete acceptance of any proposals was impossible, but consultation ought to make them 'acceptable to a much wider section of the community' (editorial 1.11.74).

E. CONCLUSION.

The editorial outlook of the B.P. substantiated the findings of Cox and Morgan's Liverpool study (1973):

> "In general, editors' attitude to party politics was to regard it as a necessary evil in local government. Several regretted the absence of independent minded council members.... What emerged was the affirmation that their papers had the (undefined) good of the town at heart and advanced this chiefly by publicising news and, though much less, by putting their own views."

The B.P. editor respected the public spirit of local politicians, writing of their 'enormous sacrifices in time and personal effort'; that 'they get more kicks than ha'pence', (editorial 20.9.74). At the same time, he was implicitly sympathetic with the 'trend to complain that local government is a misnomer: that

with the huge local authority, control is too remote: that local government does not operate efficiently because of this; and that councils ignore important local problems' (editorial 26.4.74).

As for planning coverage, the paper was conscientious, relying largely on received material, but drawing attention to developments likely to affect the quality of life in the area. Local planning attempts were supported because their speedy implementation would mean an end to blight, and the background planning history was presented in a lucid and comprehensive way. There was one feature article of planning interest - on the successful private conversion of Victorian factory buildings into 25 units for displaced traders and small industries - but this was exceptional ('New role for Alston Works', 28.6.74). The B.P. drew less attention to problems facing the planners (for example, on the new council estate) than to the implications of planning decisions (development control). One of its roles was to keep an eye on a system seen as favouring the would-be developer against the aggrieved citizen.[11] The editor cited one instance of direct influence by the B.P., when someone had phoned the paper complaining that the ground layout of some new flats was not that of the approved plan. After this had been checked and a story published in the B.P., the borough had ordered a new start.

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11 "The only person who has any right of appeal against a planning decision is an applicant whose plans were not accepted. We think that objectors should have the right of appeal as well." (Evelyn Smith, North-east region of National Federation of Consumer Groups, quoted Telegraph, 20.10.74)

As the chronicle of local events the Barnet Press relied on being told what was happening, which was why it resented impediments to the full reporting of local government. Although a business (like any other paper), the B.P. had a sense of responsibility for the town and this included a duty to keep its readers informed of possible changes in their local environment.

CHAPTER 6 : PROBLEMS OF REPORTING LONDON

The boundary of the Greater London Council (approximately the built-up area) contains 610 square miles and a population of 7¼ million. Many of London's problems stem from its size and the concentration of national activities in the city. These include all the national news organisations, that is two broadcasting authorities (B.B.C. and I.T.N.), two news agencies (the Press Association and Reuters), seven Sunday and nine daily newspapers. Local news is provided by B.B.C. Radio London, and the independent London Broadcasting Company (which has news service arrangements with I.T.N.). In addition to the two London evening papers there are 145 weekly newspapers circulating in the G.L.C. area (Press Council 1974) and perhaps thirty to forty community papers (ten in the borough of Camden alone).

What the conurbation lacks, however, is a morning newspaper devoted to its affairs and interests. Other parts of the country may, and frequently do, complain at the south-east bias of national news coverage. To concede this is not to deny that the region itself is inadequately reported.

The existence of a morning paper is no panacea. Cox and Morgan (1973) found that despite the existence of a regional morning daily over three-quarters of a sample of those most involved in running Merseyside's politics and local government felt that press coverage was inadequate. They observe that 'Liverpool only' news, while it has potentially more room to

compete for in the dailies, has also much more news to compete with.

In the national mornings pressure of space is such that essentially local news must always take a backseat. When a London story makes national headlines, the follow-up may well be assigned to another reporter, because the specialist is working on something more important. In a national paper sustained coverage of a local issue is not usually possible.

In August 1974, a London journalist[1] announced his intentions to fill this omission (reported in The Times, 16.8.74). He hoped to produce a regional newspaper on the model of the Yorkshire Post or the Newcastle Journal, covering local affairs in detail. "London is the worst reported city in the world", he said. To be called the Globe, the paper would employ about twentyfive journalists (compared to 100 or more on some national papers). By using cheaper production methods than the standard Fleet Street letterpress he hoped for a break-even circulation of 70,000. It has not been launched, and its prospects are not encouraging.

A. NEWS SERVICES.

1. Evening News and Standard.

London has had two evening papers since 1960 when the News absorbed the Star. Between them they have lost almost 900,000 sales in the last decade. Although its circulation is much less

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1 Peter Paterson, a journalist with 26 years experience on the Sunday Telegraph and the New Statesman, of which he is assistant editor.

than that of the News the Standard has lost fewer readers proportionately - just over 30% compared with the Evening News' 45%.

TABLE 9 .

Circulation of London Evening Papers, June 1973.
(Figures in brackets indicate change in the five years up to June, 1973) (Press Council 1974)

	Circulation total	%
Evening Standard	495,000 (-88,000)	37.3 (+2.4)
Evening News	831,000 (-258,000)	62.7 (-2.3)

In July 1974 Baistow suggested that 'what the News is really suffering from is a crisis of identity. The Standard's strength is that it knows its place in the London scene and who its readers are. It is tabloid only in format: in content it is a thoughtful, liberal and well-written paper well up to national journalistic standards'. At that time it had a 58% ABC 1 readership against the Evening News' 43%.

During the second half of the year two changes occurred. First, the Evening News went tabloid (18.9.74). Its circulation was still slightly dropping, and that of the Evening Standard slightly rising. In his advertising build-up, Mr. Vere Harmsworth, owner

of the Evening News, enthusiastically cited the success of the Sun and his own Daily Mail. The editor of the Evening Standard commented on the new style paper: "It seems to me they have moved distinctly down-market. If they continue on this course I think the roles of the two evenings will be much more polarised than they are now and there will be room for both of us" (quoted, Times, 17.9.74). The possibility of one or other going out of business remains a real one. By December 1974, the G.L.C. were sufficiently concerned as to back the idea of cash aid to help keep both on the streets: 'A single evening newspaper', commented a spokesman, 'would mean the amount of coverage given to local government would decrease' (quoted Evening Standard, 18.12.74).

A second development was the end to Saturday printing by the Standard with an estimated annual saving (allowing for loss of a day's sales and advertising) of £636,000 on production costs of £1.2 million.

The image of the new Evening News is snappy, especially editorial comment.[2] Consequently the Evening Standard is the only London paper which aspires to considered comment on city-wide politics and planning, although in the opinion of a G.L.C. press officer, it merely 'philosophises more'. One Evening Standard reporter felt that as an evening paper, bought for easy reading on

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2 'A Government Inspector recommends that the Albert Bridge should remain open to traffic. The Inspector is wrong. The bridge is one of the prettiest in London. Only selfish and idle motorists will begrudge being diverted. Someone should tell the Inspector that people matter more than cars.' News, 27.9.74. It no longer has a planning reporter.

the journey home, it lacked the authority of a breakfast table daily. Autumn 1974 features included a special report on the effects of the Labour government's rent act, a pre-publication assessment (by David Wilcox) of the White Paper 'Land', and an inquiry into the abuse by private motorists of the Oxford Street buses-and cabs-only scheme.[3] Often the editorial column is concerned with environmental matters. In December one of these (10.12.74) discussed Oscar Newman's concept of 'defensible space' and Colin Ward's book 'Tenants Take Over' with reference to London housing estates.

2. Local Papers.

Local papers do not, of course, attempt to cover London as a whole or even London politics. Mostly established in the later nineteenth century - before the congealing of separate settlements into the one conurbation - many retain their traditional circulation areas.

Wistrich (1972) found that in the Borough of Camden local government reorganisation prompted some minor changes of press organisation. One of the five papers circulating in a part of the borough turned itself into the Camden Journal. Another, the Hampstead and Highgate Express, published a slip edition called Camden Borough News, while retaining its main readership in the north of the borough. Particularly in outer London the boroughs are of administrative significance only, bearing little

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3 'After the Evening Standard exposed the problem, the police agreed to enforce the scheme more rigorously", chairman of G.L.C. transport committee quoted in Evening Standard 3.9.74).

relation to perceived or traditional communities. One local paper is unlikely to cover the whole borough, while others, like the South London Press, will circulate through several.

The diversity of locality interest within London can perhaps be illustrated from rough comparison by story-type of five months local planning coverage in an inner and outer London newspaper (Table 10). This shows that nearly twice the proportion of 'planning stories' in the inner London paper were about housing policy and management, and over one-third more on transport. Here the problems of road congestion and heavy traffic are intensified. Feelings ran particularly high over the merits or otherwise of a joint borough and G.L.C. experimental traffic management scheme (Barnsbury). A complaint was that it favoured the 'gentrified' area by diverting traffic down working class streets. Proposals to modify the scheme were being contested..

In Barnet, housing issues included mortgage assistance and the sale of council houses. Most housing stories in the Islington Gazette concerned council (borough and G.L.C.) estate problems, the activities of tenant groups and a controversy within the 100% Labour council over the limits on its responsibility to house homeless families. This was initiated and pursued in the correspondence columns of the paper. Some of the variation in coverage is attributable to the different character of the two papers (the Islington Gazette is more 'popular', less parochial, and with a heavy human interest bias). One contrast which is

TABLE 10.

Comparison of Planning Coverage : The Barnet Press and the Islington Gazette May - September, 1974.

Subject	Barnet Press (circulation 26,000)		Islington Gazette (circulation 22,000)	
	Number of Stories	%	Number of Stories	%
Development Control	52	32	12	8
Housing Policy	39	24	72	49
Roads and Traffic	27	18	43	29
Local Authority Plans	14	9	-	-
Conservation (built environment)	11	7	16	11
Recreation/ Countryside	16	10	4	3
TOTAL	160	100	147	100

certainly of locational significance is their comparative coverage of the G.L.C. In the Barnet Press this was confined to brief items on statements of G.L.C. policy, and incidental references where strategic roads and overspill estate proposals were concerned. Consequently when the G.L.C.'s 'Strategic Housing Plan for London' was published, its content was summarised in two sentences. The rest of a 9 column inches report contained local councillors reactions to it. In Islington, the G.L.C. was regarded as almost a second local council.

Both papers backed their borough's housing policies. (The Gazette's deputy editor and senior reporter, was Labour chairman of Reading council's housing committee.) Islington claimed that responsibility for adequately housing Londoners extended beyond borough boundaries, while Barnet did not accept it had a duty except to its own electors.

On an issue like housing the only newspaper to address the problem from the conurbation angle is the Evening Standard. It is often the only voice above those of the conflicting interest groups. In September 1974, the paper commented on a D.O.E. report, which 'confirmed' what the Evening Standard had long maintained: ".... that the capital's Tory controlled outer boroughs are doing a great deal less than they could to ease the severe housing problem of inner London." (Editorial 4.9.74). Yet as the Layfield committee (1973) observed, given London's local government system the boroughs could hardly be blamed for concentrating on

solving the housing problem faced by their own residents. This point will be taken up again later in the chapter.

3. Local Radio.

London has a B.B.C. local station, and two independent broadcasting companies. One of these, Capital Radio, is a pop music station. Both 'news' networks have found London's size and diversity a problem. After three months of London Broadcasting (L.B.C.), New Society commented 'As B.B.C. Radio London found, no enterprise can call itself London's local radio station. London is too vast.' (editorial 3.1.74).

Broadcasting makes more demands on local authorities than the press. It cannot be fobbed off with an anonymous statement, but requires the right voice. The novelty, says Frank Mansfield, of London Broadcasting, may be why people ascribe to it a power that it does not have. It is the local papers, he insists, that are really important to councils: "They lie about the home for up to four days, they are closely scrutinised, and they are generally more thorough. Television is a background flicker across the tea-table. And radio competes for attention with the offer on the back of the cornflakes packet" (Municipal Journal, November 1974). Nevertheless, radio is well suited to presenting background and informed discussion of issues of general local concern.

B. LONDON PLANNING AND POLITICS.

1. Pressure group lobby.

It is perhaps too early to assess the potential contribution of local radio to public involvement in London's planning. London Broadcasting was set up (October 1973) in the wake of an unprecedented public reaction against London planning policies.[4] In December 1973, the Conservative government's decision to suspend issue of Office Development Permits coincided with the end of the property boom. The G.L.C. Press Office reckoned that by mid 1974 the number of planning queries was about 50% down on eighteen months previously.

By March 1973, the Standard detected signs of 'a remarkable metamorphosis' in the attitudes of officialdom: 'It is most notable in the field of public planning. In London, largely thanks to the persistant pressure of amenity groups, local community leaders and the media, the worst aspects of authoritarian arrogance are now being whittled away' (Evening Standard editorial, 29.3.73). The transport planners would soon lose their dominant position at the G.L.C.

The Conservatives had won the 1967 and 1970 elections on a platform to 'get London moving', physically moving. In 1973 they were defeated by Labour's promise to 'save London'. The campaigns of conservationists, as has been demonstrated with reference to Piccadilly, were echoed in, and sometimes led by the

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4 1972/3 saw the publication of the report of the Layfield committee on the Greater London Development Plan; the scrapping of the ring roads; opposition to redevelopment plans for Covent Garden, Dockland and Piccadilly; and near hysteria in the media over the activities of property developers. Over 700 groups said to be active in planning issues in London were listed in the London Community Planning Directory (Nov/Dec. 1972). By December 1973 Rising Free bookshop, at 197 Kings Cross Road, which monitors the alternative press, knew of twenty-three community papers in London.

press. But could public pressure and press campaigns work for projects, as well as against them? Sir Desmond Plummer, Conservative leader on the G.L.C. reflected, after the party's election defeat, "We seem to have lost our will to achieve anything positive in London any more." Jenkins (1973b), writing on the politics of London motorways, concluded that it was almost impossible for any administration to put into operation important schemes concerning the environment: ".... be they reactionary or progressive, if they directly affect the private property or amenity of a group of articulate individuals, however small, they can be swiftly bogged down." David Wilcox now deliberately avoids 'anti-stories' (conservation, problems of squatters, and so on) believing that what is now needed is positive action. In late 1974 he was pushing the arguments for supplementary licensing of vehicles in London.

2. The Greater London Council.

> 'The G.L.C. is the most dreadul authority in Britain. I can't remember when they last made a decision.'
>
> 'The G.L.C. should be abolished..... there is no political forum for London, nowhere that makes the decisions that matter.'
>
> Journalists, Evening Standard.

It is not through want of trying that the G.L.C. has failed to win friends. It has led the rest of Britain in the field of public relations. In September 1974, the staff of its

press office numbered 19, and included three housing and two planning specialists. From the autumn of 1974 each of the council's 200,000 homes received a regular six page tabloid newspaper informing tenants of rights and services. Question time at G.L.C. meetings is regularly broadcast by both L.B.C. and B.B.C. Radio London (although they were not allowed to relay an unprecedented censure debate in September 1974). The press office releases news items to about 60 main local newspaper groups (approximately 115 titles). The Islington Gazette challenged its borough council to 'match the G.L.C.'s average of about 6 press releases a day!' (Islington Gazette, 5.7.74).

The rationale behind its establishment (1965) was largely a planning one. It was to be the strategic authority for London with three main areas of responsibility - housing, transport and the regional economy (office policy, etc.). Layfield (1973) ridiculed its strategic planning attempts. Accusing the authority of being hopelessly unrealistic in assessing its influence, the committee, in effect, told the G.L.C. that its chief function was a monitoring one.[5] Since Layfield, doubts have been expressed in many quarters over the effective powers of the authority in any sphere. David Eversley (1973a), chief planner (strategy) at the G.L.C. 1972/3, writes: "Everybody knows by now why London planning cannot function at the G.L.C. level. The council has no control over the big decisions which are

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5 "Local planning authorities must accept that structure plans are above all documents which bring together what is known to be happening and which contain the most accurate forecasts, without their being distorted by hopeful projections of untried policies." (Report of the Panel of Inquiry into the Greater London Development Plan.)

reserved to Whitehall, and it has no control over local planning, which is the preserve of the boroughs." The authority employs 120,000 people. If the G.L.C. is to be no more than 'an enormous urban research unit' (Peter Hall) the question must be asked: need it be so big?

In 1974 a number of voices called for the abolition of the G.L.C. They included Hugh Cubitt (November), then leader of Westminster City Council, and Simon Jenkins (July). So too did Jenkin's successor as columnist on the Evening Standard, Alan Watkins (political correspondent of the New Statesman). In his first article ('Wanted: someone to take the rap for London' Evening Standard, 5.11.74) he argued that 'the only way in which people who work and live in London can acquire the sense that somebody is in control is by the appointment of a politician from Westminster'.

3. City Politics and the Journalist.

The call for a minister for London highlights two aspects of the city's politics central to the journalist's approach. First is the lack of a defined decision making body. Both boroughs and G.L.C. may be overruled by central government. It was Whitehall who decided that the Hilton, the Shell Centre, and Knightsbridge Barracks should be built: and it was Whitehall that refused to sanction the introduction of owner liability for illegally parked vehicles. If the working journalist (or anyone else) wants to know what is happening in London where does he begin?

Secondly, there is the general acceptance that local politics in Britain is, in Jenkin's words, 'excrutiatingly dull'. In Britain, councils are elected to administer local services within a national legislative framework. Public relations is confined to promoting local services in a favourable way. Although traditional attitudes are responding to new pressures, councillors once elected have owed, implicitly at least, first loyalty to the (national) party they represent. At the same time they 'still jealously guard their right to judge what is best for the local community' (Hill, 1974).[6] A recent American analysis of London politics and land-use planning put down this reserve largely to the British system which offered no incentive for members and officers to project a public personality. 'Much of the local political news that appears in the American papers is the result of the fact that the political fate of the major participants rests on electoral approval of them as individuals' (Elkin, 1974). For members, support within the party is what matters after being elected. Similarly, officers do not have to build up a public reputation to survive a change of council. Promotion is linked rather to length of service and to ability. Neither councillor nor official has personal political incentive to talk to newsmen. Whatever the advantages of the system, this impersonal characteristic of local politics

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6 A new breed of councillor is now appearing, less concerned with defending the authority and its officials and more anxious to know what local groups are about. At least three London boroughs - Islington, Camden and Lambeth - have young professional leaders of council.

may account for its apparent tedium. Two years after London government reorganisation a survey found that one citizen in three had no idea what the initials G.L.C. stood for. It would be interesting to know how many Londoners could name the leader of the G.L.C. (Sir Reg. Goodwin) - probably less than have heard of Mayor Daly of Chicago. The previous G.L.C. leader, Sir Desmond Plummer, acquired a certain fame or notoriety but not through anything he had done for London; he was the recipient in Tokyo of an angry telephone call from Mr. Heath (then Prime Minister) who had found difficulty in negotiating London traffic. While comparing American and British city governments, one other contrast should be drawn. Whereas the mayor of New York receives a £20,000 salary and the use of a mansion, the leader of the G.L.C. commutes from a house in Sussex and is paid basic expenses and up to £10 approved duty allowance a day.

The substance of this chapter may be summarised as follows. As local politicians cannot look to one paper to consistently and in depth report London's politics, neither can local newsmen put their fingers on the political pulse of the city. London's planning is divided, responsibilities are fragmented, with the result that any significant programme is vulnerable before self-appointed pressure groups who consider their own, or a vicarious interest to be threatened. Local and non-commercial papers reflect a vitality of commuunity life. What

London - the region - appears to lack is political direction.

CONCLUSION

It is usually argued that any decrease in the number of newspapers is necessarily bad. Certainly a locality without a paper is in a sad state, but there are many other channels through which information flows, and which balance a monopoly local press. Seymour-Ure (1968) has suggested that this emphasis on newspaper numbers has been at the expense of discussion of their quality. Too little attention has been paid to 'whether the newspapers we do have are properly equipped to assemble, interpret and criticise information about politics and government'. It is a fear that Mr. Foot's bill, reinstating the legality of the closed shop in industry, permits a future restriction on the ability of the press to illuminate all aspects of society (including the activities of trade unions) that has prompted the concerted campaign to have the press declared a special case.

John Birt (1975), head of Current Affairs of London Weekend Television argues that there is a bias in television journalism, not against any particular party or point of view but against understanding. 'And this bias aggravates the difficulties which our society suffers in solving its problems and reconciling its differences.' Similarly the mark of a good paper, be it a national daily or council estate newsletter, is the contribution it makes to our understanding. This is determined by both selection of news and how it is presented (that is, the context in which items are placed). For stories concerned with political problems and

planning this perspective is important, and journalist specialisation an advantage.

Particularly disturbing is the consequence of the organisation of the newspaper industry to discourage recruitment to local papers (and especially to the weeklies) of journalist staff as highly educated as many of their readers are likely to be. The most encouraging development in recent years has been the emergence of the community newspaper. Perhaps the test of any serious paper, besides being informative (factual) and entertaining (well written), is how often it continues to stimulate the reader after it has been used to wrap up the potato peelings.

(c. 27,000 words)

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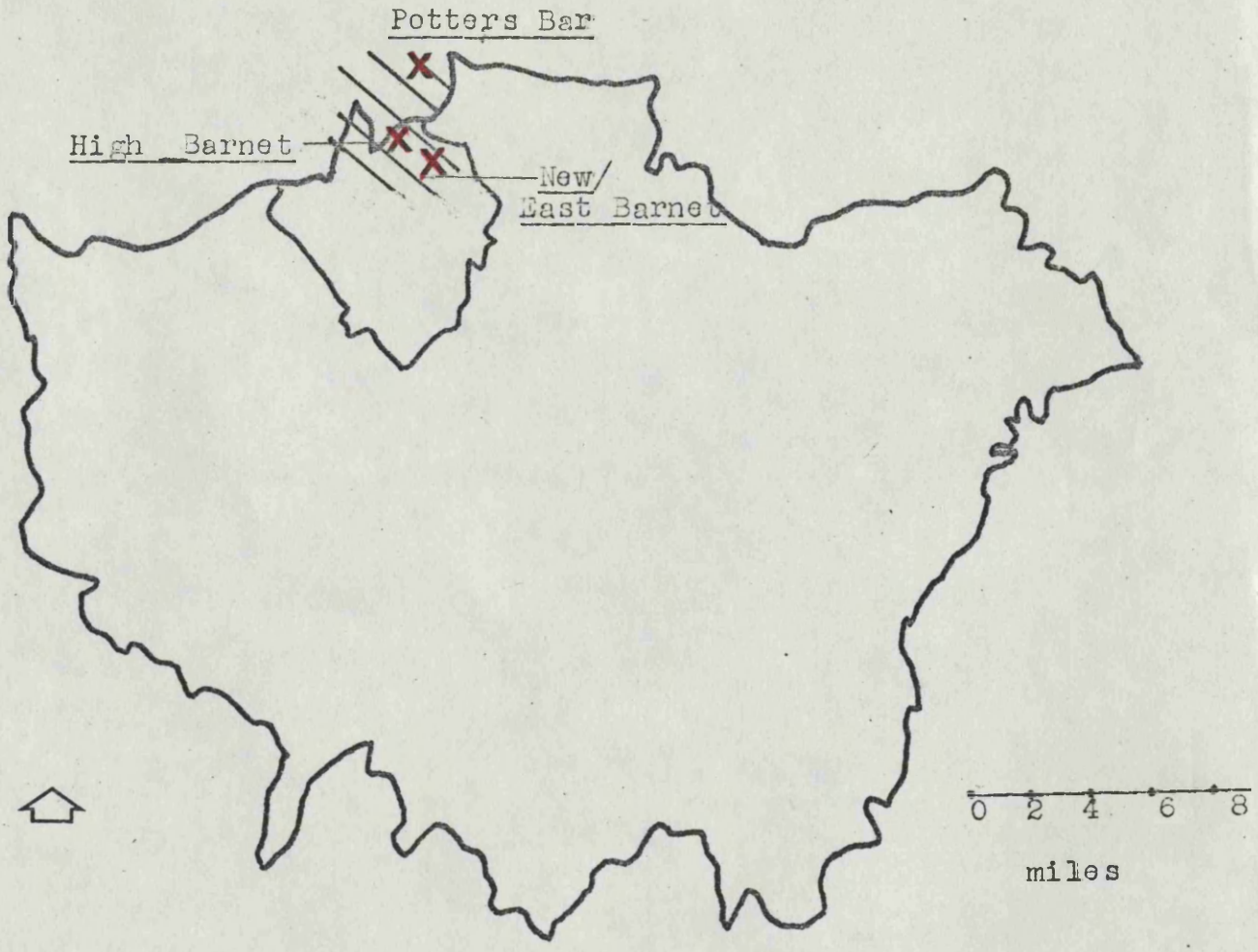

G.L.C. boundary showing the Borough of Barnet

\\\\ Circulation area of the Barnet Press