

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON PROPAGANDA

With special reference to "Current Affairs"

by JOYCE HARRIS

(A member of Transvaal Regional Council of the Black Sash)

PROPAGANDA has a double aspect. When considering its aims and objects, its successes and failures, it is necessary to remember that there are two sides to the coin — that of the propagandist and that of the person or persons at whom the propaganda is aimed.

For propaganda to succeed it is essential that the propagandist conduct his campaign with absolute conviction, admitting of no doubts in his objectives, which are clearly defined in his own mind. He will not admit the existence or validity of any other point of view, and the material he presents will always be in terms of his own convictions, with selection in presentation a natural *sequitur*.

His easy victim will be one who has no very clear convictions of his own. The less convinced he is, the more muddled his thinking, the easier he will be to break down. Conversely, a person with strong convictions of his own will put up a resistance to propaganda. However, it can and does have an insidious, repetitive effect which gradually undermines convictions, and does so more effectively if the convictions lack clarity of thought.

An individual will naturally respond to propaganda in terms of his own particular bias with his own built-in values and patterns of reaction, and in trying to evaluate propaganda techniques and effectiveness it is essential to recognize this. Propaganda begins to succeed when the individual begins to doubt and question his own bias and his own values, and it is most successful when it manages to break down this bias and to convert. The only effective defensive weapon with which an individual can be armed is a conviction and a clarity as strong and as sustained as that of the propagandist. Those who live in this country, who do not agree with the Government but who have been bombarded with Government propaganda over the years, must realize the truth of this.

Fundamental Assumptions

Government propagandists appear to start off with certain fundamental assumptions. The basic one is that the Government is always right, that it can do no wrong, and, as a necessary corollary of this, that no criticism is valid and that all criticism is nonsense. It becomes worse than nonsense, in fact it becomes distinctly subversive,

when the further assumption is made that the Government is South Africa, when the identity of the state itself is submerged in that of the currently ruling party. Then criticism becomes "un-South African", unpatriotic, traitorous. So the second assumption is that the Government is the country. A third assumption, and a natural addendum to the two preceding ones, is that not only is the Government always right at home, it is always right in its assessment of events elsewhere and in its diplomatic relationships with other countries. It can, in fact, do no wrong.

These fundamental assumptions then become the essential objectives of its propaganda machine. It brings all its guns to bear upon building up its own particular brand of patriotism, and the superiority of South Africa in all respects. There is never any self-questioning, only self-justification, and events everywhere are interpreted from this basic premise in order always to confirm and consolidate it.

One-sidedness and smear techniques

To achieve these objectives certain techniques are used. In his accusations against some sections of the Press, Ivor Benson gave a very clear definition of the technique of one-sidedness, obviously used, too, by all propagandists. He said, "All that is missing is some portion of the news. The editor of a newspaper, when he decides what is to be published and what is to be left out, automatically operates his own system of news censorship". This is the automatic censorship of propaganda, and the accusation fits the accuser as aptly as it does the accused.

He defined for us, too, the smear campaign. It is interesting to note that he was attacking those who oppose the Government, but these same techniques are clearly in operation in Government propaganda. He said, "When you cannot deal effectively with your opponent's statements, there is only one remedy — and that is to identify him with someone or something disgraceful — in other words, to smear him". There are many other techniques of smearing — by insinuation, by drawing false analogies, by implication — for instance, in the reaction to the award of a Gold Medal to the editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, where the award was seen as "a part of a world-wide effort to discredit South African policies and have them changed," and where Mr. Gandar was associated with other leaders who "seem so often to have had shifty feet".

Another aspect of the smear campaign has been the establishment of false premises, the plugging of these premises as incontrovertible fact, and then the use of them as undesirable labels. "Communist" has been equated with "Liberal", also with "Capitalist Press", and "freedom" with "licence". "Liberalism" and "humanism" are words which have been tainted and are now frequently used as weapons of criticism. Our defences have been breached. We tend to forget that these words have been given false meanings. We are anti-Communist. When someone is labelled a communist we tend to condemn, and when someone has once been smeared it is easy to intimidate him and difficult for him to refute as all definitions are so vague.

The English Press is smeared and discredited by accusations of Communist penetration. "There has been Communist penetration of the Press. But in many cases the Press unconsciously, again like other sections of the community, carries the Communist ball for them."

Differences in emphasis

Difference in emphasis under the guise of facts is another propaganda technique, for example the differences in the descriptions given of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Goldwater during the American Presidential election campaign, when it was quite clear that the propagandists favoured Mr. Goldwater, though this was not actually said in so many words. The presentation of half-truths and of only one side of the picture is another aspect of this technique, such as in the review of U.N.O., and of activities of Equity, of the "Independence" incident, of the donation by Holland to the Defence and Aid Fund. The truth is told, but not the whole truth, and only one point of view is offered. The implication is one of contempt for any other point of view, either by failing to mention it at all or by failing to enlarge upon it. In discussing the labour shortage the possible contribution of non-White labour is ignored except in terms of their contribution to their own communities. Government policy is presented as the only possible one, with no reasons given or needed. It is simply stated as incontrovertible fact, and often in such a way that job reservation, for instance, begins to look attractive to the African.

Events in Africa

Events in Africa are used to emphasize the rightness of Government policy, as in the presentation of the Congo situation. The logical deductions are difficult to refute, but the analogies are often incomplete. Events in Tanganyika, the Protectorate elections, developments in the Transkei are used in the same way. So is the Indian question — where India's motives are questioned but this Government's actions towards the local Indians are not mentioned. Events in other parts of the world and signs of rethinking on certain issues there are given the same treatment, and

there is no hesitation in misrepresenting the situation in South Africa if it can be made to fit neatly into the context. "In South Africa . . . there has been a firm belief in the possibility of steady progress, at any rate for the Bantu people . . . For this it is held that two conditions are necessary. One is political advancement of the Bantu and the other is economic inter-dependence with the white man which will keep the min continuing touch with Western standards, methods and technology."

There is no embarrassment about inconsistency when there is capital to be gained—for instance, court rulings are quoted to prove a point regarding the naming of co-conspirators during the Sabotage Trials, and this despite the fact that recent legislation does not hesitate to by-pass the courts. They can be inconsistent in other ways too—other countries may not voice their criticism of South Africa by introducing sanctions, but South Africa is perfectly justified in introducing them herself, for example against K.L.M. and the Ford Works. They are unswerving in their ends but not particularly fussy about the means employed.

Sanctimonious and self-righteous

South Africa herself is built up by diminishing other achievements elsewhere in relation to what is achieved here — for instance mining achievements are compared with Space developments. Concrete examples are constantly quoted of what the Government is doing about such matters as housing or the economy, I.D.C., the aircraft industry, Safmarine, oil output etc. The main difficulty within the country itself at present would appear to be the economy, and the public is constantly being exhorted to save. There is also much consternation about road safety.

"World Affairs" are always presented with orientation towards the importance of South Africa, such as with the Simonstown issue or the production of gold in relation to world monetary difficulties, or South Africa's solution to its difficulties in relation to the growing race problems in Britain. South Africa is shown as well-off relative to the rest of the world and better able to cope, able, in fact, to teach the rest of the world and show them the way. Even an article on Churchill is used to imply that South African leaders fall into the same superior category. The propaganda is sanctimonious, pious and self-righteous, and numerous examples are quoted of the unfair treatment of South Africa by all and sundry, such as in the matter of the price of gold. She remains, however, long-suffering.

There are endless quotations from journals and articles that confirm the South African point of view, sometimes in such a way that a completely different emphasis is given in order to alter the implication of what was said and make it look favourable to rather than against South Africa. An example of this is the use made of an article

Propaganda on tap



Rand Daily Mail.

in *The Economist* called "The Year of Verwoerd." It is interesting to note here, in passing and in all fairness, that this misrepresentation could have been quite unconscious and merely the result of the propagandist's own bias when he read the article — an interesting example of how an individual takes what seems significant to him out of what he sees and hears.

Useful knowledge and information about events and conditions in other parts of the world is given, though always with reference to the South African context, such as the comparison between Formosa and South Africa. This makes it more easily digestible through familiarity, but also lays it open to abuse. Highly complicated world problems are also simplified for easy consumption, for example Vietnam.

South Africa "always right"

When local events are critically used to expose the weaknesses of Government policy by those who oppose it, the techniques of criticism are analyzed, answered and refuted by throwing them back upon themselves, as was done when Sewgolum won a golf tournament.

The validity of criticism is discounted simply because it comes from persons known to be critics of the Government, the assumption being that this logically makes it invalid. Often such persons have previously been "smeared". No attempt whatsoever is made to deal with the criticism as such, for instance the criticisms from the British Council of Churches, or, more recently, the prisons exposure.

Propaganda in South Africa is symbolized by the mailed fist in the velvet glove. It is long-suffering and gently chastising, as in its criticism of the "Un-South African Star". South Africa is always right, no-one can harm her, and even sanctions turn out to her advantage. This

is the fundamental objective of all these techniques, and probably many others as well, but there are other trends too.

The propaganda is anti-English Press. It is anti-U.N.O., anti-the United States and anti-Great Britain, probably in that order. There would appear to be a growing campaign against the United States. All these countries and organizations are controlled by the African States and need to return to sanity. It is anti-the African States and plays up every difficulty there. It is anti-Communist all the way through, but often muddled in its definition of Communism, just as it is anti-liberal and anti-humanism and muddled here in the same way. It is very conscious of the "Swart Gevaar."

It is obviously pro all Government policy which it plugs consistently. It is in favour of conservatism wherever it can find it. It is pro-France and de Gaulle, perhaps because he favours the gold standard and is antagonistic to the U.S.A. It is pro-Rhodesian independence.

The importance of South Africa in the eyes of the Western world is built up and emphasized. She is important for her stability, economic and political, as a bulwark against Communism, as a strategic base, the implication here being that she need not worry herself unduly about criticism, because fundamentally she matters too much, and in the long run will be proven right and the rest of the world wrong. Even though she has been ignored and ill-treated, she will come out on top. World politics are viewed broadly as a confrontation between the U.S.A. and China, with Africa as one of the prizes. South Africa generally appears as a disinterested observer, but events are always interpreted in her favour.

Need to be vigilant

In all fairness one is obliged to admit that the build-up of the South African image by the South African Government is justifiable, but the interpretation of numerous events both here and elsewhere in order to achieve this is questionable. Whether propaganda is justified in building up the South African Government as perfection is another matter. The propaganda machine is undoubtedly achieving results, and from this point of view must be regarded as good propaganda. Whether or not you consider it good will depend upon what you yourself consider to be good, right and just. It will depend upon what your convictions were when you first began to be subjected to it, and what has happened to them. But no-one is ever safe from propaganda, though those who are in happy agreement will not regard it as an antagonist. For those who do, for those who still place some value on their right to think for themselves, judge for themselves and reach their own conclusions, it would be well to remember that there is no limit to the insidious power of the spoken and the written word. There is an ever-present need to be vigilant.