

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS OF AFRICA

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UNTIL the recent advertisements about the Federation and the Union of South Africa started appearing in the newspapers, a good many of us did not take the Public Relations business very seriously. Of course we were wrong. The trouble was, and is, that the Public Relations man's function in life remains vague, the extent of his influence unknown, particularly to 90% of the journalists who meet him or handle the material he dishes out every working day.

The only reasonable certainty about the Public Relations business is that it is steadily growing in size, influence, and skill; and that over the last few years it has been moving more and more into the field of international diplomacy and propaganda, particularly into sensitive areas like Africa. For students of trends in power, this is something eminently worth the watching.

The P.R. man's object is "to create and encourage public goodwill" for his client. He seldom does this by meeting the public directly. He influences opinion by using advertising agencies or—more subtle and effective—by getting stories about his client in the news columns of the newspapers and by personal contact with journalists and others thought to have some influence in spreading the desired message.

Most of his work is done through his relationship with ordinary newspapermen. He does this firstly by providing a service of news and views, facts and opinions, from and about his organization or client. And very useful it is; you might almost say indispensable as journalism has become today.

All this has an influence on modern newspaper reporting—just how much it is hard to estimate, because no journalist can say what story he would or would not get if the P.R. men were not there to "help". The P.R. service, the hand-out, the press conference all help to make life easier for the newspaper in a hurry; it is a matter of conjecture whether they don't also make those they serve lazier and a little more complacent, ready to take things at face value; and whether, for the sake of the nine relatively unimportant stories on which the P.R. man renders such service, a newspaper does not surrender the chance to dig out the one story which the P.R. man would hate

it to discover and which it would really do the public some good to know.

This is the sort of background one ought to keep in mind in looking at the latest and most significant move of Public Relations—into the field of international affairs and diplomacy. For, in addition to projecting attractive images of Ministers, tycoons, industries, and film stars, some of the biggest and most skilful P.R. agencies have recently been helping to do the same thing for governments.

Here, too, their function is many-sided. They act as political advisers, telling governments what sort of image the public will take and what it will not. In one or two countries this service to the government also puts them into the position of political agents for one particular party. Internationally, they aim to establish “a climate of opinion” about their clients which will encourage foreign investors to have confidence in the particular government’s stability, its distaste for rash socialistic measures and its fondness for private enterprise, the richness of the natural resources and the readiness of the labour force that it controls.

One of the most interesting assignments of this sort, and probably the biggest single task of its kind that any P.R. firm has handled, is the recent attempt to present Sir Roy Welensky’s government of the Rhodesian Federation in attractive clothes.

Just before the Monckton Report was established, when the jungle telegraph had already drummed the unpleasant news of its secession clauses to the territory, the Federal Government engaged Colman, Prentis and Varley Ltd. (who handled publicity for the Conservative Party in Britain at the last election) and Voice and Vision Ltd., a Colman subsidiary, to handle a public relations campaign aimed at advertising the benefits of Federation.

This campaign is now in full swing and will last four months. How much the agencies have been given to spend on the job is not precisely known. Rumour is that it is between £20,000 and £40,000; and, considering the energy of the campaign, the amount must certainly be large. Press advertisements cover education, health, agriculture, industry and living standards in the Federation—as Sir Roy sees them. Four-column spaces are being taken in all the most influential provincial and national British dailies and double-page spreads in opinion-forming periodicals. Millions of British readers will already have seen them.

One typical advertisement in the series is headed “*Good*

News from Africa—let facts have a hearing.” It goes on to claim that in the seven years of federation, “firm footings have been laid for African progress”. On Education it proudly mentions the million African schoolchildren in the Federation—an increase of 50% in the period. It describes the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland as an independent, multi-racial university, and it claims that “Africans who can make good use of a higher education shall have it”.

It talks about increased expenditure on Health; how African farmers are being taught more efficient methods of cultivation and assisted with fertilisers. Under the heading, “African living standards rising”, it claims that the total money income of Africans in the three federated territories had doubled in seven years to over £100,000,000 in 1959. It admits that “poverty remains a serious problem”; but it claims that the African now gets things that were formerly beyond his reach.

The advertisement does not mention that in Southern Rhodesia the average African income is still scarcely 5% of the European's, that the apportionment of land is grossly inequitable, that the African is hedged round with disabilities if he wants to move into a town's commercial centre, that he may not grow Virginia tobacco, the most profitable cash crop, that the State spends twenty-five times as much on the education of a white child as it does on an African one, that there is clear discrimination against Africans in housing and jobs, and that—most significantly—Africans suffer numerous humiliating civil disabilities which the Europeans do not.

To help lend some thoughtful, semi-philosophical substance to their work, the P.R. men have invented a professional jargon which does not always square with what happens in practice. They maintain that their task is “to make communication between publics easier” (between whites and Africans too?); “to interpret human ideas and reconcile group interests” (whose ideas? whose interests?). They see their work as “a means of guiding conscience in support of self-interest” and as “helping to fill a moral vacuum” (do these phrases really mean anything at all?).

Another good example of the P.R. method came the other day in a series of advertisements placed in the British press on behalf of South Africa House. These all led off with the reminder—“Good understanding and good relations with the Union concern YOU TOO”.

In six paragraphs, the advertisement gave the size of the Union's external trade figures; reported on its mineral production; claimed that its income per head was the highest in Africa; declared that the education system provided for universal literacy, that social benefits in the Union provided for all its citizens, that conditions there attracted 20,000 natives a year across the borders and, finally, that "the Union has a long record of government stability".

As a piece of copy-writing and P.R. methodology, it was an entirely competent job. The advertisement is said to have already attracted numerous enquiries. As a picture of "South Africa in Fact" (as its headline claimed) it is, of course, ludicrously selective and inadequate.

The good P.R. man can exert a great deal of influence on behalf of his client-government, using many techniques of "image-projection". A good example of this was the boost given by P.R. to Obafemi Awolowo, the Premier of Western Nigeria, during the London constitution talks of 1958. The P.R. agency which he had retained to help him, Patrick Dolan & Associates—regarded as one of the most capable in the business—inserted a full-page advertisement in several papers setting out Awolowo's views on self-government. Patrick Dolan believes that it had the desired effect: the impact of this impressively expensive piece of advertising showed that Awolowo meant business; these were his demands and he was going to stick to them.

Most of Dolan's work lies in creating a favourable "climate of opinion" about Western Nigeria, so that investors are encouraged and reassured. Dolan himself sees it as exciting, pioneering work. He does not seem to mind that, inevitably, his agency is identified with one political party, Awolowo's Action Group, as much as with the country as a whole. He speaks with enthusiasm of the way the country is growing.

Dolan's are happy with their work; and so is Michael Rice, who handles the P.R. work for Ghana. In much the same way, working on similar lines, he helps to present Ghana's image to the political and business worlds in Britain.

Some P.R. men who have worked for foreign governments are frankly much less happy about it. One of them has recalled how the local information service plotted jealously against him, and how he ended up caught in a web of plans and counter-plans spun by various conflicting officials.

Prince Galitzine, the head of another leading London agency, also experienced in the international field, agrees that some of the accounts are simply white-washing operations and that the picture of the country put across by the agency concerned is very seldom, if ever, as complete as it should be.

It is fair to say that, in the nature of the job, no P.R. image can be complete. It puts forward the "positive" side of the client; and if some of the warts and wrinkles are omitted, then few P.R. men would think that a considerable sin. Does any newspaper, plugging its favourite subject or personality, do any better? Perhaps not. At least we know our newspapers' prejudices a little. With the P.R. business, it looks even more important that the public should get to know a great deal more about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what their fundamental philosophy is.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, JULY 2, 1946 AND JUNE 11, 1960 (74 STAT. 208) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

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(Sgd.) Ronald Michael Segal

(Signature of editor, publisher, business manager, or owner)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1960, London, England.

(Sgd.) S. C. Crowther-Smith

Notary Public, London.

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