

GOVERNMENT AND PRESS

Relations after the War

"Is the outspoken desire of the press for independence matched by an equal sense of public service on the part of those who direct it?" asks the *Economist* in an article on wartime press controls in Britain. Those interested in the issues raised in the article should refer back to Current Affairs Discussion Bulletin No. 6, "Newspapers and the News."

THERE ARE TWO aspects of the present campaign for an independent post-war press which require somewhat more careful consideration than has so far been given.

On the one hand there is a tendency to overstate the degree of wartime control over the newspapers. Paper is harshly rationed, and the most important news, for reasons of national security and the exigencies of warmaking, is passed through an official filter; but the expression of views, apart from a range of safeguards for the defence of the realm, which in fact have operated very far from onerously, has been quite remarkably unconstrained. With regard to the post-war period, on the other hand, too much, perhaps, has been said by the representatives of the press about what the Government must not do, and too little, certainly about what the press itself must do, if it is to discharge fully its great public responsibilities.

No Truce to Criticism

During the war the newspapers have been confronted by an array of special machinery set up to guide and instruct the public. The press has been used by the Ministry of Information and by the press officers and public relations departments of the various Ministries to explain the war and its conduct to the people; and the essential condition has been the unprecedented degree of national unity embodied in Mr. Churchill's all-party coalition Government. Control of the press, in so far as there has been control, has been one of the means to

an agreed end. But, although there has been a truce to party politics in the peacetime manner, there has been no truce to discussion and criticism. Indeed, the suspension of party politics in Parliament, and, in the form of elections, in the constituencies as well, has provided the press with added opportunities and responsibilities—"to speak for England." It is for this reason that every attempt to use the Ministry of Information as a Ministry of Propaganda, or to use particular press officers as the advocates of particular Ministers, has been jealously, and on the whole successfully, opposed. On a balance of its wartime deeds and misdeeds the press has done well; more harm has almost certainly been done to the war effort when newspapers have been too uncritical than when they have been too critical.

The Facts are Complex

But if the press can claim a good-conduct stripe, so, too, can the Government. It is a figment of the imagination to picture the newspapers exposed to ceaseless pressure and dictation during the war; and a false conclusion to argue from this false premise that the whole apparatus of public information at present provided by the Ministries in wartime should be swept away. Modern Government, in peace or in war, has a particular need of an informed public, and therefore of an informed press, if its democratic character is to be preserved; and there are many items in the complexity of twentieth-century legislation and administration which must inevitably be unknown, inaccessible, or unintelligible to journalists no less than to the citizenry at large. The case for press officers and public relations departments was already proved before the war.

Competence is the key. There are certain informatory functions which can only be performed by Government Departments themselves; they cannot be satisfactorily carried out either by