

Lady Antonia Fraser's June 20th group, Charter 88, the quasi-official Communist Party document *Facing the Future*, the proposals by individual MPs that we should think of electoral pacts and the policy reviews within the Labour Party itself. They are all laudable. They all give cause for hope. They all recognise the need for heavy-duty intellectual work. They are all necessary elites set up to do this.

They all share the same failing. Their exclusiveness is not the problem as such. All new ideas and initiatives start with small groups. And Charter 88 at least, like the policy rethinks in the political parties, is intended to be the property of millions. Yet they all deal with what governments should be doing in the self-limiting circle of what governments should do in politics and the economy. Most are in danger of drawing too rigid lines round their political field of action; of being out of touch with popular concerns, of responding to existing structures, departments, and notions of what is political rather than the new conflicts being created. Talk of electoral pacts may seem irrelevant if none of the political parties and structures can express what people want to see happen—what they want to make happen through their own voices.

Many of today's popular anxieties have a deeply moral tone. Where the Conservatives' economic logic appears to have been unanswerable (it works), people have ignored esoteric arguments about the poverty trap and responded with a simple question: isn't it wrong to have so many in poverty when so much money is sloshing around? Electricity and, in particular, water privatisation have hit, not an economic or even political objection; rather a deep and atavistic feeling that the ancient elements of earth, water, fire, and air are a common inheritance. A deep distaste against mistreating animals has nothing to do with the economics of cosmetic or meat production, it has a little to do with a moral disapproval of "pampered" idle women in fur coats, but much more to do with an innate sense that the powerful and knowing should protect the weak and innocent. Politicians debating the proper conduct of social services do not begin to answer the deep unease about cruelty to children. It is the unbridged gulf between popular morality—a language we can all speak—and professional politics—a language possessed by a few—which leads so often to the simple moral demands for retribution and punishment which make professionals shudder.

If the new initiatives on the left are to develop into popular movements—and they won't unseat Conservatism unless they do—then they have to make priorities of three questions: firstly, a new relationship between people, property and the natural environment. Our present language of political rights and opposition to dependency has not been adapted to the new needs. Secondly, we need constitutional changes which create powerful community bodies in which people can directly use their voice, and which can be an effective voice for people. Functioning within the sort of democratic changes proposed by Charter 88, the fear that this would just enhance racism and drawbridge communities could be mitigated. And thirdly, the left needs a clear sense of the moral premises of political positions. There is nothing inherently right wing about morals. ●

Radio wars

Twenty government inspectors have just spent £50,000 turning five British radio listeners into criminals—for receiving non-government approved radio signals, and then talking about what they heard. Last Friday, civil servant Mike Holland became the last of a group of radio freaks from south London to be fined by magistrates for offences against the wireless telegraphy acts. Overall, the five have been fined nearly £8,000 and have forfeited over £10,000-worth of specialised radio equipment. The major offences of which they were accused were "listening to stations they were not authorised to receive". One unemployed member of the group was threatened with imprisonment, but was eventually fined £1,150 instead.

Holland and his colleagues had been charged *inter alia* with offences against Section 5 of the 1949 Wireless Telegraphy Act, which makes it an offence to listen to as well as to transmit radio signals for which the government has not given you a licence. But the radio law is as absurd as was the whole *Spycatcher* farrago—what the five did would have been perfectly legal provided they were drug-smuggling foreigners in fast yachts a few miles offshore, or KGB agents plotting espionage from central London.

Similarly, just as everyone abroad could read *Spycatcher* while Britons could not, radio waves do not stop travelling when they hit the 12 mile limit. Whether KGB agent or radio amateur, anyone abroad can listen to and record transmissions at long ranges. More to the point, millions of people in Britain have listened to "unauthorised" transmissions, since it is physically impossible to prevent anyone tuning into signals which can be found in every living room, and many of which can be received on an ordinary domestic radio.

What has bothered the government inspectors—who ironically come from the newly renamed Department for Enterprise—is that government deregulation and reduced customs barriers have themselves encouraged the flourishing of a huge underground network of radio listeners, many of whom employ highly sophisticated computerised interception and analysis equipment. For sums ranging from £400 to upwards of £2,000, you can buy a radio "scanner" which can receive virtually every frequency or wavelength in common use, and automatically record when and how it is used. The scanners have been imported into Britain in increasing (and unchecked) quantities since the late 1970s; it is estimated that thousands are now in use. We have seen or know of many systems now operated by British radio listeners and hobbyists, the sophistication and power of which would have been the envy of the GCHQ electronic intelligence agency itself only a decade or so ago.

Overseas governments have long ceased to pretend that the radio spectrum is private, and do not criminalise "scanning" *per se*. Listeners in the United States, for example, can buy the openly published, 120-page *Confidential Frequency List* or similar publications, which explain how to receive transmissions from everything from the forestry service to the secret service or Pentagon nuclear strike signals. (Needless to say, the KGB had these facts a long time before the American public worked them out.) Similar publications are available in Germany, France, the Netherlands and many other countries. But although many signals listed are transmitted from Britain, and can perhaps be received in Kiev just as well as in Amsterdam, distributing similar information in Britain may be illegal if it comes only from British sources.

But despite the ban, many British listings are available, such as "How to receive stations you are not supposed to listen to"—on a *samizdat* basis. The network prosecuted last week was

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only one of many groups which have prepared their own lists; one of its members was prosecuted for circulating one.

The case against the south London five began late in 1987 when radio monitors working for the (then) Department of Trade and Industry overheard group members exchange details of "interesting" frequencies by radio. For ten months thereafter, relays of DTI inspectors monitored and transcribed every word the five and their friends spoke on the air. The whole effort cost some £48,000, DTI lawyers claimed in court. Twenty officials had spied on the five and their friends, sometimes rising before 5 am to do so.

Finally, in July, 25 police, and DTI officers arrested the five in a coordinated series of heavy-handed raids. One man returned home to find the entrance flattened, the burglar alarm disconnected and a team of men rummaging around in his bedroom. He ran out to call the police. Another was held overnight. All of the group were cross-examined for hours, on the basis of transcripts of their radio conversations. They were questioned at some length about so-called "codewords" they had repeatedly used on the air—such as "VIM". But "VIM", the DTI

In the week the Soviet government finally let its people receive Radio Liberty, the British government threatened to jail "unauthorised" British radio listeners. Duncan Campbell and Nigel Townson report

sleuths were informed, had more to do with in-group speak for chicken vindaloos than with men from Moscow.

In an extraordinary attempt to justify the disproportionate expenditure of money and resources at a time of supposed public service stringency, DTI lawyers claimed in court that they had feared the group were "spies".

The DTI case nearly fell apart since, at the time of the raid, one of the five had actually been monitoring the DTI inspectors' own frequencies, near 160 MHz. He had been listening in while the different DTI surveillance teams coordinated their activities, clearly preparing for a raid. But while out making tea, he narrowly missed a direct reference to his own neighbourhood, which would have alerted him. He returned quickly to his room to listen in to the exciting radio action that was clearly about to start, and prepared to call up friends to suggest that they listen in too. Then there was a loud knock at his door, five men charged upstairs and grabbed him, and he realised to his horror that he was part of the plot.

The recent cases are unlikely to do more than inspire other radio freaks to be more cautious about what they say on the air. Although there are valid security grounds for wanting some transmissions to remain secret, there is no solution to the problem of dangerous (rather than recreational) interception, except to scramble the signals. IRA technicians, KGB listening staff, drug smugglers and other targets of official surveillance know perfectly well how to receive and track their opponents' radio signals, just like GCHQ. All that cases like last week's do is to nurture a pretence that such signals can be made secure using the law, rather than technology.

Even MI5's own signals have been ludicrously obvious. Until their frequency was changed in the early 1980s, anyone in and for miles around London could receive MI5's top secret "Watcher" radio network, the system used to control surveillance teams watching diplomats and spy suspects all over London. The "Watcher" signal, on 104.5 MHz, was about an inch along most people's radio dials from Capital Radio. It even came (and still comes) from Euston Tower, where the heavily curtained headquarters of MI5's watcher service, are located 15 floors above Capital's own studios.

The Watcher radio signals have since been moved to a slightly higher frequency of 142.5 MHz, but they are no better concealed. One of the main users of the new MI5 frequency band is the Soviet Union, many of whose *Salyut* and *Mir* space stations transmit to earth on frequencies also used by MI5. London's activity on the same wavelength can hardly have gone unnoticed.

In this and other ways, equipped with a scanner, the radio spectrum turns out to be a



Main picture: Euston Tower "Watcher" service headquarters and transmitters. Inset: frequency scanner display of MI5's "Watcher" radio signal

beguiling paradise of extraordinary events. Find "Stagecoach" talking to its "Eagles" on 454.075 MHz and you're listening to the US Embassy and its VIP car network. Down the bands, "Glassjar" and "Proton Control", on the police frequencies of 147.5 and 147.85 MHz, have been Special Branch surveillance control stations. For action and drama every morning of a higher order than TV-am can provide, one Londoner tuned his radio alarm to the Customs Service main "Magpie" surveillance frequency, 86.71 MHz. Early many mornings, plainclothes agents with "Magpie" callsigns could be heard trailing drugs suspects across London—and there can be little doubt that drug smugglers were listening in as well.

Police regional crime squads are a favourite with real life police soap enthusiasts, who tune in on 155.7MHz. (Bank robbery gangs do the same, and more.) And if the police have put a

bug on your car, you can bug your own car bug by listening in between 80 and 81.5 MHz. More respectably, CND activists in the South of England can monitor the movement of cruise missile convoys by tuning in to Greenham Common's "Echo Control" on 73.65 MHz. Greenpeace could usefully monitor the three national "nuclear spills" channels at around 86 MHz.

Last week's case was a vain attempt to pretend that the government could ever now put the brakes on listening to the airwaves. In the month in which two separate broadcasting satellites begin to force the recognition that the British government cannot control all that we see and hear (and never could), it is silly to try to pretend that unwelcome radio signals can be made to bend away from our living rooms—any more than the beams of Radio Liberty could be diverted from Moscow by the ill-will of the Politburo. ●