

Heralding Lansbury and a radical paper

I still find it hard to believe that it is 45 years since the masthead of the *Daily Herald* disappeared from our newsagents' shelves. A lot of people, and a lot of publications, have sought ever since to fill that gap but, apart from *Tribune*, the gap remains. There is no longer a national daily newspaper of the left-wing character of the *Herald*.

Not only has the entire political balance of the national press moved further away from that concept, but in the near half century since it died our trade has seen the most remarkable transformation in the way we communicate ideas, events and certainly propaganda since William Caxton invented moveable type. In fact, we have now entered a period where the talk in fashionable media circles (and it is therefore probably unreliable) is all about the "death of newspapers" along with prophecies that future generations may well grow up in a world without knowing what pen and ink is, except as museum pieces; and where the craft of letter writing may come to be regarded as a preadamite art. In fact, we already have a couple of generations who haven't the slightest idea of what the *Daily Herald* was all about.

Such disturbing thoughts occurred to me as I read a most amazing book written by George Lansbury, one of the great Labour Party pioneers of the early 20th century. It is called *The Miracle of Fleet Street: The Story of the Daily Herald* and was first published in



Australian cartoonist Will Dyson drew many powerful pictures for the *Daily Herald*

1925 by Pelican Press. It has just been republished by Spokesman Books with the original typography used 84 years ago. The reason for that, the publishers point out, is: "So modern readers can enjoy the elegant achievements of Labour's earlier typographers." For £15 this classic collectors' item, surely a kind of socialist Biblical text, is an exceptional bargain.

In superb style and with characteristic modesty Lansbury, as its original editor, describes the astonishing birth of what became the national daily newspaper of the Labour Party and trade union movement. And for those young people who have never heard of the *Herald* let me point out that after its birth in 1912 with an initial capital of £300 it strug-

gled through World War I as a weekly, was reborn as a daily in 1919 and then, finally, adopted in 1922 by the Labour Party and the TUC as the official national paper of the Labour movement.

Most amazing of all that paper, the *Daily Herald*, had by 1937, the year *Tribune* was born, developed into the biggest selling national daily newspaper in Britain.

Of course, that astonishing point had not been reached when Lansbury wrote this book. Yet he lived long enough – he died in 1940 – to witness his dream paper reach the summit of British newspaper readership ahead of them all, beating the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, the lot. Yes, I realise it is now almost beyond belief.

In the meantime, Lansbury had become a Labour MP and, briefly, leader of the Labour Party between 1932 and 1935, when Clement Attlee succeeded him. It is an extraordinary story and an integral part not only of Labour history but also of Britain's history – and one that is still too little appreciated.

When the curtain finally closed on the *Daily Herald* in 1964 it still had a circulation of more than 1 million when it was bought out by the *Daily Mirror* group who re-labelled it as *The Sun*. Five years later, in 1969, Mirror Group Newspapers sold the title to Rupert Murdoch for £75,000 (which now would hardly buy a season ticket at Manchester United). He turned a broadsheet Labour paper into a Tory-supporting tabloid with topless girls on Page 3 – and the rest is a sad story. Sad for the left in British political life, sad for journalism in general and, in my view, sad for the entire culture of radical ideas and radical writing. To be sure, there have been attempts to fill the gap: *The Guardian* came close to achieving it at one stage, especially after the death of the *News Chronicle* in 1960; and then there was *The Independent*, gallantly launched in 1986 and still trying hard but, alas, faltering in recent years.

Make no mistake, the going is tough for any daily newspaper, let alone one that has the courage to challenge all that we mean when we talk of global capitalism. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of journalists bear the scars of that battle. But is it really any tougher today than when George Lansbury faced a similar huge challenge in 1912? When he scraped together £300 to launch a daily "strike sheet" with the help of a few trade unions and the Co-operative Society? Maybe, now, it is an impossible challenge. Yet after re-reading the remarkable story of the *Daily Herald*, the miracle of Fleet Street, I'm not so sure. Or am I just an old romantic?

Geoffrey Goodman

(who worked on the *Manchester Guardian*, *News Chronicle*, *Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror*)



George Lansbury with constituents in Prince Arthur Avenue, Bow, east London in 1912