

New Statesman. 22/1/82.

C. 10

Anyone for Space Invaders?

BRUCE PAGE on Rupert Murdoch's latest Fleet Street shake-up



Tales about the problems of Fleet Street — an industry which supports small numbers of citizens in a style much better-padded than anything they deserve — don't always wring the withers in a time when whole sections of the British economy are being shrivelled by the breath of Thatcherism. All the same, the 'freedom of the press' is supposed to be an important element in our democracy, so the latest tribulations of Times Newspapers under the leadership of Rupert Murdoch deserve a little examination.

Last February, Mr Murdoch gained control of *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* by delivering himself of some lofty promises about preserving the editorial independence of the two papers. They were accepted in exchange for dropping a lawsuit which the journalists of the *Sunday Times* had launched, and which was aimed — with good prospects of success — at forcing the British Government to obey its own laws, and refer the Murdoch takeover to the Monopolies Commission.

Until last week, the *Sunday Times* had two deputy-editors: a situation created by Murdoch himself, and not an absurd one for a big, sectionalised newspaper. One, Mr Ron Hill — also the executive in charge of the colour magazine — has been abruptly fired.

The other, Mr Hugo Young — the paper's political editor — has been demoted in favour of a transfer from the daily *Times*, Brian MacArthur.

Mr MacArthur has been around for a lengthy while, without having acquired any recognisable qualifications for displacing one of the most consistent award-winners among British political journalists (Young) — being judged superior to one of the most sensitive technicians in the business

The other replacement is Mr Peter Jackson, who launched the *News of the World* colour-mag for Rupert Murdoch.

Of course, the notion of 'editorial independence' could hardly mean that newspaper executives ought to have tenure, as academics enjoy. But last year certain principles were identified which 'Mr Murdoch subscribes to and undertakes to preserve', and one said that the editors of *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* would continue to make all appointments to the journalistic staff, subject to the constraints of the editorial budget.

More about the budget in a moment. The facts of heave-ho, put-down and redeployment were indeed announced over the name of Frank Giles, editor of the *Sunday Times*. Gerald Long, Times Newspapers' managing director, tried this week to persuade me that Giles actually decided — as well as announced — all this on his own hook, with perhaps a few diffident suggestions from Rupert Murdoch.

Editorial independence is thus preserved in form — Long followed up with a homily on form's importance in this wicked old world. But here, if form is to be accompanied by substantive belief, people in the newspaper business will have to accept that Frank Giles is a worse character than he is actually known to be.

Only someone who was both a swine and a buffoon would willingly dump two vital executives who also happen to be close personal colleagues of exceptionally long standing. (Not even token complaints have been lodged against either victim's professional performance.) Nobody who knows Frank Giles thinks he is a swine. Apparently he must pretend to be one, for fear of joining the long list of Murdoch's ex-editors.

Murdoch's beef against the *Sunday*

Times is that it has grown 'boring'. This is perfectly his own fault, because he removed (to *The Times*) its highly-regarded editor, Harold Evans. The hasty replacement was Evans's long-standing deputy, Giles: an elderly Dr Watson manifestly unable to turn himself into Sherlock Holmes.

Then, in a piece of cape-work deeply familiar to Murdoch-watchers, he appointed two much more competent people (Hall and Young) just below Giles, in the hope that one or other would be encouraged to shoulder his way into *de facto* power. Known sometimes as 'creative tension', this avoids the need for the boss to make real choices — which someone operating on Murdoch's present global scale is anyway ill-qualified to do.

The method sometimes works, approximately, in tabloid newspapers of the kind where editorial content is trivial, contemptible, or both. It is automatically destructive in a complex operation where real leadership is necessary. Kipling noted something about the characteristic author of this kind of situation: when 'his folly opens the unnecessary hells', he 'throws the blame on someone else'.

Blame there could soon be. Management allegations are that, without large-scale redundancies, the two papers together could lose £15 million in the year to June 30, 1982. None of the unions involved doubts that the position is serious — but they find Mr Long and his helpers notably reluctant to explain just how the losses are being calculated, just how they divide up between *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, and to what extent things may have been exacerbated by (for instance) the massacre of marketing and accounting executives which took place last year.

To return to the question of undertakings, Murdoch originally promised that editorial independence would be firmly placed within a financial context.

The board of Times Newspapers Ltd is to be responsible, after consultation with the editors, for fixing an annual budget for editorial space and expenditure.

Within these agreed parameters, it was promised, the editors would be free to operate without interference. But nearly twelve months later, no recognisable editorial budget has been set for the *Sunday Times*, and the paper's operations are controlled — if the word does not imply too much rationality — by intermittent ukases, usually composed by Gerald Long. A recent one deserves to be quoted in full:

All executives of the company are reminded that written authorisation is required for any proposed action, of whatever nature.

There is no exception to this rule. Verbal authorisation can never be accepted. All executives must make themselves familiar with the channels for seeking authorisation for any proposal and must follow them invariably.

Gerald Long.

Obviously no great 'independence' of editorial judgment — or executive judgment of any kind — can survive in a business conducted on such bizarre lines. □