

# What Atlee's government can teach Labour about media reform

*The media landscape is ripe for reform, from poorly regulated social media to the BBC's future, to unfinished business dating from the Leveson Inquiry. These might seem as very contemporary problems, but Clement Atlee's 1945 government faced challenges of a similar nature, argues **Damian Tambini**. Starmer's Labour can learn from the Atlee's Royal Commission for Journalism, but also needs to go beyond it.*

---

Consider this historical moment: Labour takes office during a standoff between great powers under the shadow of regional wars. This occurs amid rapid economic and cultural changes as new communications technologies are deployed- and attempts are being made to undermine trust in democracy amid fear of polarisation, propaganda and disinformation.

I am referring of course to 1945-1949, when Clement Atlee's Labour government led a global debate about the media, democracy, and propaganda, showing the world how to avoid a repeat of the democratic failures of the 1930s. As the Starmer government sets its own media policy – from the [Global Digital Compact](#) to be discussed at September's UN Summit on the Future, to BBC funding, news deserts, and the stalled Leveson Inquiry, ministers should reflect on what the party learned in those postwar years.

Labour should not fall into the trap of attempting to lean on the media through deals and patronage.

There are 2 key lessons: first, think holistically and second, work proactively with journalism, the media and civil society.

Think holistically because media reforms must be based on root and branch inclusive, independent reviews like the Royal Commissions spearheaded by Atlee. Piecemeal changes will not work – because the media are a complex public and private system, and because the media have a tendency to bite back. Big policy moves need the legitimacy provided by open inclusive debate that covers the whole system.

Work inclusively: government must work proactively with civil society and the media rather than attempt to legislate a solution top-down. This is about legitimacy and bringing people with the project. Labour should not fall into the trap of attempting to lean on the media through deals and patronage.

### **The lessons of the Atlee Government**

By 1945 the Labour Party had largely given up on attempting to get a fair hearing in a press owned by a few bosses. The Trades Unions Congress had purchased the Daily Herald in 1922 as a party mouthpiece and there were calls for nationalisation of newspapers. But the policies recommended by the Royal Commission, and in particular support for professionalisation of independent journalism, were based on an ideal of democratic pluralism. This was an example of bottom up, civil society led policy. The National Union of Journalists, in evidence to parliamentary committees, was first to call for the Royal Commission on press concentration and self-regulation which was then supported by the wider union movement, campaigns and civil society.

Postwar reconstruction and democracy-building in Germany included the deliberate construction of a mixed system of broadcasting involving strict monopoly controls and public broadcasting with elaborate checks, balances and regulation.

It is largely forgotten that the UK and the US shaped media systems around Europe and the world during this period, particularly in defeated Germany and Japan. Since Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan there is a widespread assumption that post-conflict democracy building never works, but the postwar framework for media regulation in Germany and Japan endures. Postwar reconstruction and democracy-building in Germany included the deliberate construction of a mixed system of broadcasting involving strict monopoly controls and public broadcasting with elaborate checks, balances and regulation. These have stood the test of time, setting the terms for liberal democracies around the world and were largely unquestioned until our current decade. In the context of a global leadership vacuum, the UK can lead this debate once again, helping to design a new settlement for journalism in the platform age.

As I discuss in my recent [book](#), global democratic norms for the media were set in the period between 1945 and the early 1950s. Democracies legitimised through free

elections and public opinion swiftly realised that mass media are both saviour and threat. A working media system which is self-regulating can curate the process of opinion formation to support democratic deliberation. But a media system that is captured, either by concentrations of private power or by the state, destroys the legitimacy of liberal democratic states.

The Starmer government should follow the example of the Atlee government, by quickly establishing an independent Royal Commission on Journalism and the Media.

The Atlee government understood that because of this, simply leaving the media to the market was not an option. The economic processes they saw behind the spiral of media propaganda and concentration still persist. Communication media are prone to concentration because of their high fixed and low marginal costs. Early [dominance](#) by a few players enables them to squeeze out competition and control voice. In the internet age, these processes are intensified. Big social media companies wield more concentrated power than any of pre-internet media. And when it comes to propaganda, opaque algorithms target messages to individual members of the audience, taking advantage of information about them they have already gathered. These are new problems, but from the point of view of democratic legitimacy the threat is the same.

The Starmer government will rightly take a cautious approach to the press, but it should not fall into the same trap that the Blair government did, by allowing itself to be captured by the press, and leaving the market to regulate it. This means government must be bold and reject piecemeal self-interested press demands. Just a couple of weeks ago, in one of its last acts, the Sunak government reversed a key Leveson reform that was intended to strengthen self-regulation, by repealing the Crime and Courts Act section 40. But as Labour Grandee Tom Watson hinted in the [ensuing debate](#), Leveson's [Royal Charter on the Press](#), and the [Recognition Panel](#) still endure. With sensitive reforms, these institutions could play new roles in holding the media to account.

The postwar government was too cautious and the reforms enacted were in retrospect too meek. The new government will have to be bolder.

The Starmer government should follow the example of the Atlee government, by quickly establishing an independent Royal Commission on Journalism and the Media. This

would be a similar exercise to the [Estates General on Information](#) which is currently underway in France.

### **The limits of Atlee's approach**

But there is one respect in which Labour's new, radical reforming government should differ from Atlee's. The postwar government was too cautious and the reforms enacted were in retrospect too meek. The new government will have to be bolder. Whatever journalists say about wanting the government just to leave them alone, the organisations they work for have never been asking for more from Government. Should operators of large language models pay to use training data produced by journalists? This would need new IP laws. Should new competition law privilege news providers as it does in [Australia](#)? Should trusted journalism get [regulated prominence](#), which the new Media Bill gives only to the BBC? The rate of change, and the deep crisis of news media will continue to force debate on how it should be regulated.

Since establishing during the post-war period that journalism should self-regulate to serve truth and social responsibility, newsmakers get privileges and exemptions in everything from tax to data protection to market abuse regulation. The question is always the same: why should certain media, and [professional journalists](#) get special privileges? The new government will have to answer this question anew, and in doing so it must work with civil society and build on the existing template of press self-regulation.

Obviously, a media reform agenda comes with dangers, including of state capture.

The media policy of the Atlee government was far from perfect. There were failures of ethics and problems of media concentration that undermined trust in democracy throughout the postwar period. But the successes should be acknowledged: not only did the combination of a largely free press with independent regulated broadcasting deliver legitimacy in the US and the UK, it underpinned the establishment of stable democracy in Japan, Germany and across Europe. We need similar big picture policy thinking to rise to our contemporary democratic challenges.

Obviously, a media reform agenda comes with dangers, including of state capture. If they are to command widespread trust, and not be dismissed as supporting "mainstream

media” or the “deep state” the next wave of policies will need the support not only of journalism as a profession, but of civil society and the wider public. Luckily a quiet but methodical group of academics and charities: the [Media Reform Coalition](#) has been quietly waiting, researching and preparing for this moment. To kick off the debate, it has prepared a media reform [manifesto](#). The time has come once again, to think holistically, ambitiously and long term, about how to create a media system safe for democracy. Just as the Atlee government did.

---

*This article is part of Damian Tambini’s [“Forumsprofessor” Lectures](#) at the University of Cologne in June 2024.*

*All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

*Image credit: [Viktollio](#) on Shutterstock*