Albert Meltzer
The Humble Soapbox

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colportage within the Royal Parks. This was not legally successful and he was fined many times — but he was never defeated on the subject of colportage outside. Permission to do this has disappeared and with it most of the demand to do so. What now moulds public opinion is the "gutter press" which can be sold without licence to do so being necessary (other than by the suppliers). Since Aldred, nobody has challenged this police decision that public availability of dissenting literature plus free speech equals obstruction. We doubt that John Major's precedent would be accepted.

Conversely, Aldred went to prison for enabling the republican Mylius to print his paper which laid bare certain scandals in the life of George V. They did not in the least bear up to those currently peddled by all the national press about the current Royals (though admittedly the affair of Edward VIII was concealed until his abdication and the real scandals are only beginning to be revealed now).

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We turn from the play acting of John Major as a stump soapbox speaker, complete with speechwriters and a specially made box (reminiscent of the organised "gypsy caravan tours" when the gypsies have been driven out) to the real stump speakers of a bygone day. They had to know how to get and handle a crowd by themselves. Some devoted their entire life to "open air propaganda" (living upon collections) some did it for entertainment (professionally), while a great many did it voluntarily, obviously for a time.

Of those who could lecture copiously, without notes, fascinate a crowd, spread the word, explain a chosen subject more clearly than any University lecturer, one must select Guy Aldred as pre-eminent. This is not to describe his life (which should be done — a biography of him is unpublished, though he published many autobiographical writings) but some incidents which describe the problems of the "soapbox" and how it was steadily illegalised.

Aldred (born in London, and originally a boy preacher, but for most of his life's activity centred in Glasgow and a propagandist for anarchism and socialism) maintained that literature selling, essential to propaganda, was enshrined in the constitution. He pointed out that when Scotland came into the Union, the Scots demanded that colportage (the unauthorised selling of dissenting literature in public: "colportage" = selling from a tray round one's neck) What they were afraid of was that religious dissenters be prevented from selling Bibles etc should the English government become Catholic. Whatever the merits of that fear, the law was enshrined.

A line of reformers ensured secularist then socialist literature was respected. Aldred argued this many times in court successfully. He pointed to the fact that if one applied to the police for a street trader's licence to sell papers, one was told there was no such licence available because it was not necessary. Because of the colportage laws, newspapers were sold in the streets (limitations came within the trade itself), without police permission being necessary. (This is the origin of the term the "gutter press"). When in the thirties the police decided sales of socialist literature caused obstruction, they were altering the laws on colportage. Aldred struggled to enable

us he resented) "The scamp who broke his gamp at Ardwick Green" (tune Monte Carlo).

This legally upheld attitude — that the speaker standing on the soapbox must be responsible, for damage done to the person who broke an umbrella hitting him, did not apply merely to the police nor was this confined to a hundred years ago. (Nor just to England: the Haymarket Trial in Chicago was more serious that the speakers should be hanged for a bomb exploding while they were on the rostrum). Matt Kavanaghan, an Anarchist speaker in Liverpool, was as a young man around 1905, involved in a case where people storming his platform had their clothes ripped, accidentally or not. He being on the platform, could not have been physically responsible and they were clearly the aggressors. But he was held responsible for the damage to their clothing. The suffragists were constantly told that if they suffered from eggs, mud or even bricks, it was their own fault "for not behaving like ladies and staying at home".

An amusing sideline is that during the Great War there was a mob attack on a peace meeting at the Unitarian Church, Southgate Road, when Bertrand Russell was in danger of being lynched. The respectable ladies with him appealed to the police presence to save him. They remained stolidly impassive as one after another implored them to save the life of a man they described as the most distinguished philosopher in Europe or the most celebrated mathematician in England. Only when one, more worldly wise, protested that he was the son of an earl did the police wade in as one, truncheons out to preserve the noble dissident.

During John Major's pseudo-soapbox stump, a member of the public threw eggs at him, and was fined for the assault and ordered to pay damages for the suit. It would have been interesting to know if Neil Kinnock, instead of holding a presidential-type campaign and scorning the humble soapbox, had gone stump speaking and been hit by an egg, whether the police would have decided he was enough of a socialist to deserve what he got (as had virtually been decided by previous assaults on Ramsay MacDonald, Aneurin Bevan and even Kinnock himself) or if the new respectability led to his being treated equally with John Major. The media would certainly have treated it differently.

The Prime Minister was presented with a new soapbox to celebrate his election victory. Sir David English, editor of the Daily Mail, said Mr Major's use of a soapbox was 'brilliant'. (News item).

A week before the 1992 General Election, when the Conservative Party was facing almost certain defeat, and the Labour Party was holding triumphal meetings at mass rallies, John Major, in what was regarded as a last desperate effort, took to the streets with a (specially made and adapted) soapbox carried by an aide, and stumped the country, giving prepared speeches at crowded street corners and market squares. The Labour Party, knowing little of the history of the labour movement and slightly ashamed of what it did know, said it had long since passed that stage. What they did not point out, or maybe did not know, was they "passed that stage" when they became respectable as by then it was virtually illegal.

Many radicals abroad look to "Hyde Park Corner" (confusing it with Speakers' Corner, Hyde Park) as a bastion of free speech. It is true a few religious or comic turns are kept alive on improvised platforms at Speakers' Corner, and anyone can get up and speak. But genuine Speakers' (affectionately called Spouters) Corners existed in every park and at innumerable convenient street corners. Reforming parties and sects marked out their special street corner pitch where they were regularly known. They were a forum for political debate. Generations of workers educated themselves in a political faith more thoroughly than the London School of Economics has managed during its history.

Hyde Park was waning when the television age came along (and the growth of cars made street corner meetings difficult and finally impossible). But serious political discussion was everywhere (its last bastion was Glasgow Green). It may be noted that in the days of mob violence against speakers, usually by populist parties and often subsidised by free beer, attacks were made on Anarchists, Socialists, Atheists, Suffragists — in particular women of any persuasion. Even Protestant Truth speakers in places like Liverpool were attacked, though here sometimes the police intervened, classifying them with the Salvation Army, ever entitled to flout the rules on marches, meetings, street music, obstruction, trespass and even entry into public houses for literature selling.

Normally the police view was that attacks were orators' hard luck and served them right. However, from the moment Fascism appeared in the 20s (see last issue), the police were concerned to defend them from attack "in the name of free speech".

As anti-Fascist violence escalated but anti-reform violence disappeared, under the growth of socialist ideas, the police took a closer interest in open air meetings and the defence of Fascist speakers. They are still concerned to protect Fascist marches and restrict others. Improvised speaking has vanished from the streets under police harassment — except for the museum piece of Speakers' Corner, Hyde Park.

Until John Major "reclaimed the streets" — for himself alone — the police had illegalised extempore speaking. It is dubious if getting on an improvised platform (which usually happened to be a soapbox lying around) and saying what you thought was ever actually made illegal. Except for the Salvation Army, the police claimed it was "obstruction". Even at Hyde Park, selling literature outside the gates obstructed the traffic and pedestrians, although selling the Sunday papers or Christian literature did not. Selling inside the gates is illegal though not for ice cream vendors. (Later a few sellers were allowed outside the reconstructed lavatory entrances in the underpass).

Stump speaking built up the labour movement; its decline heralded its end. The working class movement was built from it, what is now regarded as the left comes from State-controlled University sources. The hopes of the labour movement on education were unfulfilled: what in practice it built up was the Labour Party and a working class divorced from it, which now picks up notions from the tabloids.

Extempore speaking had its drawbacks. The regular speaker, feeling himself or herself a leader or a misunderstood genius, could turn to parliamentary ambitions (e.g. the old Clydeside socialists), aspire to leadership by virtue of their oratory, or obtain an inflated ego that made one think oneself was so much more important than the cause represented. But for John Major to play at speaking from a soapbox, surrounded by armed plain clothes guards, was an obscene travesty of the reality.

The Manchester Anarchists

In the "Personal Recollections" of George Cores (pub. KSL) reference is made to the Manchester Anarchists of 100 years ago and their struggle for free speech. We have since publishing it received for our archives a copy of the relevant chapter of "Twenty five Years of Detective Life" by Jerome Caminada (Chief Detective Inspector of the Manchester Police, pub John Heywood 1895). Writing of "Manchester Anarchists at Work" he deals with the events of September 1893.

He says a number of "irresponsible young men" held meetings at Ardwick Green. (The numbers of young working class men and women as given in the proceedings and in Cores's memoirs and the support they received indicates that though this was not a "golden age of Anarchist activity", it was certainly a promising one — far from the depressing scene Manchester and everywhere else presents today).

Det. Insp. Caminada naturally — and perfectly frankly — attacks the views they were expressing (including "abusing Her Majesty and the Royal Family and criticising the emoluments they received", as well as "preaching Anarchism") and said there were "serious complaints" about those views which led to charges. The Chief Constable was asked to put a stop to "what had become a serious nuisance". He "tried to reason" with the obstructionists, pointing out that it was a very improper place to hold their meetings and offering them the use of Stevenson Square, "where they could air their grievances from morning till night without being interfered with".

The offer being refused of Stevenson Square which was deserted at all times, the Chief Constable himself came to the next meeting in Ardwick Green, stated it was an obstruction and could not go on. (The meeting was certainly not as large as John Major's, with worldwide publicity: probably less than that of the TV and press photographers and journalists following him).

In an attack on the meeting (by how many police Caminada does not say) the detective inspector hit the speaker with his umbrella. Later, when they were fined and ultimately imprisoned, he sued for the damage to his umbrella hence the Anarchist song (which he tells