

RAMBLING AT RANDOMby Tim Hamlett

About selling detergents and lovely Govt people

OUR Government is not, as a rule, much given to public introspection. We may suspect that in the privacy of some Central bar wails of despair and disillusionment occasionally hit the ceiling. But in public they usually prefer to tell us how lucky we are.

However to every rule there are some exceptions.

Our "life with the Lions" department, for example, the other day came across Mr Alan Scott, the Government's information chief, bewailing the unjustified abuse heaped on his innocent underlings.

From letters to the editors of local newspapers, Mr Scott lamented, "one might conclude that Government is engaged in a massive propaganda exercise in mind control and behaviour training."

No doubt Mr Scott's audience of freshly-stuffed Lions now braced themselves for an assurance that nothing could be further from the truth.

But Mr Scott took an unexpected turn. Instead of arguing that the Government didn't do it, he cheerfully justified the practice.

I quote: "I do not think one can accept the assumption that it is acceptable for commercial advertisers to use subtle, clever and very expensive means to sell their products through the media, but it is somehow not quite cricket for a Government to use the media in similar fashion, but in lesser degree, to encourage patterns of social behaviour and responsibility, in fields such as prevention of crime, keeping Hongkong clean, road safety..."

This argument is an interesting advance on previous contributions. At least we now have it on good authority that the Government is using "subtle, clever and very expensive means."

How many connoisseurs of Government publicity efforts will accept, though, that they are always used to encourage social behaviour and responsibility?

What about that stream of "information" whose main objective seems to be to enhance our appreciation of our lovely leaders?

Mr Scott seems to have overlooked an important difference between efforts to "sell" Government policies and efforts to sell commercial products.

The purveyors of washing powder are engaged in competition with each other. Consumers of washing powder will be told, cleverly and subtly, that "scientists agree that Brand X washes whiter."

They may at first believe this. Then they will find that the same claim is made on behalf of Brand Y. Eventually they will conclude that scientists will say anything for a few free packets of washing powder and rely on the evidence of their own senses. Much has been spent but no harm has been done.

The Government, however, is not competing in a competitive field with its equals. Let us take a concrete example. A Legislative Councillor stood up the other week and announced that 90 per cent of the squatter huts in Hongkong were built by racketeers.

The surprising thing about this statement was not that the racketeers' figure was so high, but that anybody else was

credited with building a hut at all.

For as all diligent readers of Government dispatches from the squatter control front will know, every hut that our squatter control staff knock down has been built by a racketeer.

Or has it? If we accept that our Councillor knows what he is talking about then it seems that the ten per cent of our squatter population who build their own huts for lack of anywhere else to live have been done an injustice.

The Government propaganda machine has lumped them in with the rest of the hut-building population as "racketeers" - and of course they have no redress. They cannot very well write to the editor of a local newspaper and point out that the third hut knocked down in yesterday's squatter pogrom was not a triad investment property, but their own self-built home. Hut-building is an offence.

The objection to the Government throwing "subtle clever and expensive" propaganda about is that much of it is to the detriment of people who are not in a position to throw even the most crude, ignorant and cheap variety back.

Departments which often come into conflict with groups of members of the public (Housing springs to mind) are particularly prone to depicting their opponents as anti-social, perverse and unfair.

This is not only unfair, it is also inefficient. There are some areas where an accurate knowledge of the public's feelings is an important determinant of policy, but the Government barrage makes it difficult for any other feelings to emerge into the light of day.

Consider the uphill fight faced by those who feel that we do not yet have the best of all possible police forces.

This brings us to an interesting specimen of GIS "information" purveying, which emerged unexpectedly last Sunday.

A local newspaper interviewed the Hollywood producer who is currently making a film (it appears to be an English-speaking kung fu movie with pretensions) in Hongkong.

Readers who ploughed their way through to the 20th paragraph of this unlikely oyster came to this little pearl: "We had some slight snags with the GIS initially," says Mr Bennett. "They suggested that we make some modest alterations to the screenplay to make certain that Hongkong wouldn't be shown in any unfavourable light. Not that that was our intention anyway, but we did make the changes and now have 100 per cent co-operation from them."

What was the appalling slur on Hongkong that was causing problems, one wonders - corruption in Government House, orgies in the Hongkong Club? No.

Mr Bennett goes on to explain that a member of our friendly local police force was originally portrayed as a "bad guy". He was swiftly re-assigned to an international police force, and GIS co-operation then resumed. No doubt the film will have gained enormously in realism as a result.

Nevertheless this successful censorship of a foreign film inspires some worrying thoughts. What degree of co-operation from Government do our local TV producers require - and how much are they paying for it in artistic freedom, for example?

Of course, an enthusiasm for censorship is not confined to our Government. It surfaces in the most unlikely places.

H. K. Standard

13 November 1981

Much mirth has been occasioned in local media circles by an incident in one of our great local corporations.

This company has a staff club, which publishes its own little newspaper. Normally this harmless publication surfaces at intervals, to sit around the company building in little heaps where staff members can pick up a copy.

Not, however, the October issue. Soon after this appeared all copies mysteriously disappeared, having apparently been removed by the management on the grounds that a written tribute to their most famous product was not sufficiently rapturous.

Clearly, you may think, an infringement of free speech. Still, it sometimes happens that attempts at suppression succeed only in earning wider publicity, and this is one of those occasions.

In accordance with this column's traditional reluctance to allow any literary gem to twinkle unseen I propose to devote a few inches to the scorned masterpiece.

As I have not obtained the author's permission for this procedure I had better not tell you his name, and I have also made one or two other deletions designed to allow you to appreciate his wit and style without being distracted by the subject matter.

Readers who enjoy a puzzle may derive some entertainment from trying to work out the removed name. Personally I think it's a work of fiction.

"The **** is probably the best buy in town at (give-away deleted). It serves all sections of the community in a variety of ways. Rolled up, it is a formidable weapon for disciplining dogs and small children; fully opened, it is a powerful deterrent against people wanting to sit next to you on the MTR.

It seldom splits when wrapped round garbage (a quality paper?) and was only just beaten by the Oriental Daily in a recent popularity poll conducted among the fish and chip shop fraternity.

As well as being of practical value, there are interesting things to read like advertisements, advertisements and advertisements.

The *** is a "family paper", and as you read the daily editorials you realise why the paper never was - and never will be - called "The Thunderer".

The **** offers a full range of features on the Arts, business, sport, interior decorating and fashions. The Classified **** is a "must" for the unemployed and the about-to-be-unemployed, and in addition, on a good day, you can sometimes find a few news items which have crept in between those numerous slightly blurred full page pictures of jewellery.

But there is one question I always ask myself each time I am challenged to take on that solid block of print that constitutes most of page 2. What does the page 2 sub tell his children he does for a living?"

Readers who wish to read an unexpurgated copy of this work will find a copy on the Press Club notice board. It comes complete with a Chinese translation which signally fails to capture the tangy essence of the original.

Meanwhile, let us await with great interest the next **** editorial on freedom of speech.