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THE *NATIONWIDE* AUDIENCE

Phase 2: *Nationwide* 'Budget Special' 29/3/77

PHASE 2 OF THE PROJECT, using a *Nationwide* programme on the March 1977 Budget, was designed to focus more clearly on the decoding of political and economic issues, as opposed to the coverage of 'individuals' and 'social oddities' represented in the programme used in Phase 1. In particular this sample of groups was chosen so as to highlight the effects of involvement in the discourse and practice of trade unionism on decoding patterns. The groups chosen were managers, university and FE students, full-time TU officials and one group of shop stewards.

The programme was introduced by Frank Bough, as follows:

And at 6.20 what this 'some now, some later' Budget will mean to you. Halma Hudson and I will be looking at how three typical families across the country will be affected. We'll be asking . . . union leader Hugh Scanlon and industrialist Ian Fraser about what the Budget will mean for the economy.

Three main sections from the programme were selected for showing to the various groups:

- 1) A set of six pop interviews with afternoon shoppers in Birmingham city centre on the question of the tax system and whether:
 - a) taxes are too high, and
 - b) the tax system is too complicated.

These interviews are then followed by an extensive interview with Mr Eric Worthington, who is introduced as 'a taxation expert'. Mr Worthington moves from technical discussion of taxation to expound a philosophy of individualism and free enterprise and the need for tax cuts to increase 'incentives', combined with the need for cuts in public expenditure. It is notable here that the interviewer hardly interrupts

the speaker at all; the interview functions as a long monologue in which the speaker is prompted rather than questioned.

2) The main section of the programme, in which *Nanowiele* enquires into:

how this Budget will affect three typical families . . . and generally speaking most people in Britain fall into one of the three broad-categories represented by our families here . . . the fortunate 10% of managers and professionals who earn over £7,000 p.a., the less fortunate bottom fifth of the population who are the low paid, earning less than £2,250 p.a., and the vast majority somewhere in the middle, earning around £3,500 p.a.

The three families are then dealt with one at a time. Each 'case study' begins with a film report that includes a profile of the family and their economic situation, and an interview which concludes with the husbands being asked what they would like to see the Chancellor do in his Budget. Following the film report, the account then passes back to the studio where Bough and Hudson work out by how much each family is 'better off' as a result of the Budget. Each family (the husband and the wife) is then asked for its comments.

The families chosen are those of an agricultural labourer, Ken Ball, a skilled tool-room fitter, Ken Dallason, and a personnel manager, John Tufnall. The general theme of the programme is that the Budget has simply 'failed to do much for anyone, though the plight of the personnel manager (as representative of the category of middle management) is dealt with most sympathetically.

3) The third section is again introduced by Bough:

Well now, with one billion pounds' worth of Mr Healey's tax cuts depending upon a further round of pay agreement, we are all now, whether we are members of trade unions or not, actually in the hands of the trade unions.

There follows a discussion between Hugh Scanlon (Associated Union of Engineering Workers) and Ian Fraser (Rolls Royce), chaired by Frank Bough, which concentrates on the question of the power of the unions to dictate pay policy to the government. Here Scanlon is put on the spot by direct questions from both Ian Fraser and Frank Bough in combination, whereas Fraser is asked 'open' questions which allow him the space to define how he sees 'the responsibility of business'.

[. . .]

Group 21

A group of white, mainly male bank managers, with an upper middle class background, on a two-week in-service training course at a private college not by the Midland Bank, aged 29-52; predominantly Conservative.

The predominant focus of concern for this group is the mode of address or presentation of the programme. This is so out of key with the relatively academic/serious

forms of discourse, in TV and the press, to which they are attuned that their experience is one of radical disjuncture at this level. This is a level of discourse with which they make no connections:

Well, speaking for myself, if I'd wanted to find out about the Budget I'd probably rely on the next day's newspaper . . . something like the *Telegraph* . . . or the *Money Programme* . . .

(From a quite different perspective, they repeat the comments of the predominantly black F.E. groups; cf. group 12: 'If I'd been watching at home I'd have switched off, honestly . . .')

Further, when asked:

Q: How did that come across as a message about the Budget?

They replied:

It wasn't sufficient, to be quite frank . . .
 . . . it didn't do anything for me . . .
 . . . I find that kind of plot embarrassing . . .
 . . . I just squirm in embarrassment for them.
 . . . I'd far rather have a discussion between three or four opposing views . . .
 . . . I mean it's much more rewarding . . . more ideas . . . they are articulate . . .

It is *ideas*, not 'people', which are important to them:

Q: What about the actuality sequences - going into people's homes?

I don't think you need it - if we're talking about ideas.

Rather than the immediacy of 'seeing for yourself' someone's experiences, which many of the working class groups (e.g. 1-6) take as at least a partial definition of what 'good TV' is, for this group it has to be about considered judgement and facts.

In that programme, what have we heard? We've heard opinions from various people which don't necessarily relate to facts . . . some of the information . . . or background . . . all you've picked up are people's reactions . . . not considered . . .

I mean . . . the point was made [by Ian Fraser of Rolls Royce] 'I'm not prepared to comment on the Budget till I've seen it in full tomorrow . . .'

As far as this group are concerned, *Nationwide* are:

exploiting raw emotion . . . they encourage it . . .

sensationalising items . . .

It's entertainment . . . raw entertainment value . . .

It's basically dishonest . . . I don't think it's representative . . .

As entertainment that's . . . maybe . . . acceptable . . . you can lead people by the nose . . . now if you're talking about communicating to the public and you're actually leading them, I think that's dishonest . . .

In startling contrast, for example, with group 17's insistence that items should be short, fast and to the immediate point, a perspective from which *Nationwide* was seen to fall short, this group feel that *Nationwide*:

. . . try and pack far too much into one particular programme . . . questions are asked, and before somebody had really got time to satisfactorily explain . . . it's into another question . . . and you lose the actual tack . . .

I can't bear it . . . I think it's awful . . . one thing . . . then chop, chop, you're onto the next thing.

This concern with the coherence and development of an argument leads them to single out the interview with the tax expert, Mr Worthington, as praiseworthy. They feel that the item was a little unbalanced:

Particularly that accountant from Birmingham . . . was . . . very much taking a view very strongly, that normally would only be expressed with someone else on the other side of the table . . .

But their predominant feeling is that at least the item contained a fully developed and coherent argument:

There he was allowed to develop it . . .

The programme certainly fails to provide this group with a point of identification, presumably because of the disjunction at the level of the programme's mode of address:

I couldn't identify with any of them.

I didn't identify myself with the middle management . . .

For them the whole tone of the programme makes it quite unacceptable to them, and they hypothesise, perhaps for others:

There's a great danger, I'm sure Frank Bough isn't doing it deliberately, of being patronising or condescending . . . and this I found irritating = that 'there's going to be £1.20 on your kind of income' . . . to me, Frank Bough on £20,000 a year . . . it's enough for a . . .

They hypothesise that the target audience is:

The car worker . . . the middle people . . . and below.

and wonder aloud that the programme might have been:

talking down . . . even to the lowest paid worker.

They place an emphasis on what this meant to the British worker . . . to a range of workers . . . I think it needed the same thing in a much more intelligent way – appealing to the more intelligent aspects of the people involved . . .

I wonder if they've underestimated their audience.

But this is a perspective which is not unchallenged; their view of the 'middle people . . . and below' also leads them to wonder:

Would many of the population be capable of absorbing the information . . . even the simple part of the question . . . especially in a programme of that sort . . .

Because, they argue:

they do not understand – the man in the street does not understand the issues. they understand '£10 a week' . . .

The ideological problematic embedded in the programme provokes little comment. It is largely invisible to them because it is so closely equivalent to their own view. The lack of comment is I suggest evidence of the non-controversial/shared nature of the problematic. Indeed, they go so far as to deny the presence of *any* ideological framework; it's so 'obvious' as to be invisible:

Q: What was the implicit framework?

I don't think they had one . . .

. . . there wasn't a theme . . . like an outline of the Budget . . .

The only point made by the presentation of the Budget, as far as they can see, is:

It left you with a view . . . the lasting impression was that [Healey] didn't do very much for anyone . . .

But they are very critical of this 'superficial' view precisely because it has not explored what they see as the crucial socio-political background:

There is another side to the coin, he didn't do a lot, but there was full reason at the time why he couldn't do a lot, and that was virtually ignored . . .

Group 22

An all male group of white, full-time, trade union officials (Transport and General Workers Union, Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians, Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers), aged 29-64, with a working-class background, on a TUC training course; exclusively Labour.

The group find the problematic of the programme quite unacceptable and accompany the viewing of the videotape with their own spontaneous commentary:

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Commentary</i>
<i>Link after vox pop interview:</i> 'Well, there we are, most people seem agreed the tax system is too severe . . .'	'That's a bloody sweeping statement, isn't it? . . . from four bloody edited interviews!'
<i>Interview with Mr Worthington:</i> '. . . ambitious people . . .'	'Is this chap a tax expert? Seems like a berk . . .' 'Poor old middle management!' 'Aaaagh!' 'Avaricious people, did he say?' 'What about the workers!' 'Let's watch <i>Crossroads</i> .'
'. . . and of course the lower paid workers will benefit . . . from . . . er . . . the . . . er . . .'	'Extra crumbs falling from the table!'
<i>Three Families Section-Manager:</i> He doesn't own a car . . .' A modest bungalow . . .' . . . we can't have avocados any more . . .'	'Ha, Ha! That's a good one!' 'Family mansion! His lav's bigger than my lounge!' 'Did you hear that!' 'Those aren't Marks & Spencer's shoes he's wearing.' 'Good! Redistribution of wealth and fat . . .' 'They didn't mention that for the other peasants.' 'Does one! He doesn't "run a car"!' 'I worked nights to do that.' 'Yurgh!'
<i>Mr Tipton digging in his garden</i> However much you get - someone else is waiting to take it away . . .' What, of course is a tragedy is in respect of his child still at college . . .' One has to run a car . . .' His child at college . . .' actually in the hands of the trades unions . . .'	'Good! Redistribution of wealth and fat . . .' 'They didn't mention that for the other peasants.' 'Does one! He doesn't "run a car"!' 'I worked nights to do that.' 'Yurgh!'

This group began by commenting that the programme was:

Obviously contrived, wasn't it, the whole thing . . . all contrived from start to finish to put the image over . . . I'm of the opinion the ones we've got to watch for the image creation are the local programmes.

This they see as an unacceptably right-wing perspective, also seen as characteristic of:

most ordinary TV programmes; serials . . . you get, em, *General Hospital*. It's so right-wing it's unbelievable – it's pushing the senior management at the people all the time. 'You must respect the consultants and doctors', and 'they're the people who make the decisions . . . and they know what they're doing' . . .

They say of the vox pop sequence in the programme that it is far too narrow and class-specific a sample of opinion to provide the 'ground' which *Nationwide* represents it as providing for their 'summation' of 'what most people think'.

Then the way the actual interviews were . . . very carefully selected in the centre of Birmingham, mid-afternoon . . . with the shoppers and businessmen – there wasn't one dustman around . . . there wasn't any agricultural workers with their welly-boots on . . . it was purely middle class shoppers out buying their avocado pears or something; then at the end he says 'everybody agrees' – he's met four people. I don't know how many people live in Birmingham, but there's more than four . . . he only shows what he wants to show.

Mr Worthington, the tax expert, is dismissed as a 'berk':

Of course everybody believes that this chap is the expert, the TV tells us so, and the things he was saying, he might as well be reading a brief from Tory Central Office, which I think he probably was anyway . . . and they didn't just ask him to lay out the facts, they actually asked him his opinion, and to me an independent expert is supposed to tell you the facts, not necessarily give you their opinion on general policy . . .

The group feel that Mr Worthington is allowed 'free rein' in the programme, very different from their experience of being interviewed by the media:

The development of the scene was allowed to go on and on, wasn't it? Glamour boy [i.e. the interviewer] just sat back and let him get on with it . . .

We've found that local sort of media – y'know we've got good relations – and yet we're cut all the time, as compared with the management's views.

The group do, at one point, comment on the form of the programme's presentation, or mode of address:

My major complaint against most of the *Nationwide* programmes, apart from the political ones, is the way in which they trivialise every topic they seem

to take up – and just when the topic begins to blossom out, they suddenly say, 'well that's it . . .'

But crucially, as distinct for instance from Group 21, for whom the mode of address of the programme is the dominant issue, for this group it is the political perspective or problematic of the programme which is the dominant focus of their concerns. The perspective is one which they vehemently reject:

The perspective was that of the poor hard-pressed managerial section . . . they had the farm worker there . . . that was, sort of, 'well, you've got £1.90 now – are you happy with that – now go away' and then 'Now, you, poor sod, you're on £13,000 p.a. . . . and a free car . . . Christ, they've only given you £1.10 – I bet you're speechless!' . . .

. . . the sympathy was, you're poor, and you're badly paid and we all know that, because probably it's all your own bloody fault anyway – the whole programme started from the premise that whatever the Budget did it would not benefit the country unless middle management was given a hefty increase – that was the main premise of the programme, they started with that . . . they throw the farm worker in simply for balance at the other end of the scale.

The visibility of this distinct 'premise' for this group is in striking contrast, again, with group 21, for whom this premise is so common-sensical as to be invisible and for whom the programme had no particular theme or premise of this kind.

This group feel that *Nationwide*, because of its politics, is not a programme for them. It is:

Not for TU officials. For the middle class.

Undoubtedly what they regard as being the backbone of the country, the middle class . . . they allowed the agricultural worker to come in so as the middle class can look down on him and say 'poor sod, but I can't afford to give him anything because I've had to do without me second car, etc!'

As far as they are concerned the whole union/employer discussion is totally biased against Scanlon:

He [interviewer] was pushing him into a corner . . . that was the first comment, immediately getting him into a corner, then the opponent [i.e. Fraser] who was supposed to have been equal . . . more or less came in behind Bough to support Bough's attack on Scanlon.

Yes, except you've got to realise Scanlon slipped most of those punches expertly – a past master . . .

but pointed, direct questions . . .

There is, however, another thread to this group's comments which emerges particularly around the question of tax and incentives. In line with the group's dominant political perspective, there is some defence of progressive taxation:

What about the social wage? It's only distribution . . . the taxation takes it from you and gives it to me . . . I mean, if you're not taking income tax from those who can afford to pay, you can't give anything to those who aren't paying . . .

So long as I get benefit for the tax I pay, I'm happy enough

But at this point a more 'negotiated' perspective appears which shares much in common with the Labour 'Realpolitik' of some of group 20's comments, they say that to criticise *Nationwide's* perspective on tax and incentives is misguided:

It's not necessarily a criticism of the programme . . . a lot of highly paid skilled operatives fall into exactly the same trap . . . they probably listen to the programme themselves . . .

As they somewhat uneasily put it, extending in a sense, some of Scanlon's own comments on the need to 'look after' the 'powerful . . . skilled elements':

One of the main objects of the full-time official is to maintain differentials . . .

I'm not saying differentials are good . . . but as a trade unionist you've got to be able to maintain it . . .

Indeed they extend this to a partial defence of *Nationwide's* perspective; at least to an implicit agreement about what, in matters of tax, is 'reasonable':

. . . I think we should try to get the income tax in this country to a respectable level to allow everyone to work and get something out of it . . . because there's no doubt about it, the higher up the ladder you go, the harder you're hit for income tax.

They remark in justification of this perspective that the problem is that 'incentives' have been destroyed, because:

They've increased the income tax in this country to such a degree that it don't matter how hard you work . . .

Indeed, they also take up one of the other themes of the dominant media discourse about trade unionists:

There's a lot of . . . unions in this country that could produce a lot more . . . British Leyland's one for a start-off.

This is not to say that they wholeheartedly endorse this negotiated/'realist' perspective. They cannot, for it is in contradiction with much of the rest of their overall political outlook. It is rather to point to the extent to which this is a discourse of 'negotiated' code, crossed by contradictions with different perspectives in dominance in relation to different areas, or levels, of discussion.