

## **WHY SENSORY?**

In the light of discussions held since the Annual Conference of Easter 1944, the Sensory Group here submits to members of the Common Wealth the case for adding some kind of sensory function to the constitution or organisation of the movement.

It is hoped that this will facilitate discussion and lead to a favourable decision at Liverpool and we ask all Branch Delegates to try to find time to read our case beforehand – adding the warning, for those who have already given some consideration to the matter, that our ideas have been considerably modified as well as clarified during the course of our discussions.

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Issued by

### **THE SENSORY COMMITTEE GROUP OF COMMON WEALTH**

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## **WHY SENSORY?**

### **(1) Danger to Democracy**

"Under existing conditions the aims or ideals of any democratic organisation are invariably imperilled by the pursuit of power. Though the achievement and exercise of power is obviously necessary to effective political action, if this power is to be wielded beneficially and remain uncorrupted it must at all times work in harness with the truth, as seen by men who are not concerned with power."

(2) The foregoing statement represents the very carefully considered view of the signatories to this memorandum, who now ask all Branches of Common Wealth to give careful and sympathetic consideration for their proposal to institute a "Sensory" Committee as an integral part of the democratic machinery of the movement. (We shall refer to ourselves hereinafter as the "Sensory Committee Group".)

### **(3) Common Wealth's Appeal**

Common Wealth undoubtedly established its claim to the attention of a cynical public by its trumpet call for Vital Democracy and Morality in Politics as the essential complements to Common Ownership in the new society which men of good-will seek to create. By Morality in politics, a phrase which incurred the suspicion of those who scent humbug in all professions of righteousness, there was intended, in our view, nothing more than the postulate that whatever standards of conduct are to be generally accepted by the community must be common to politics, as to all other public and commercial activities, as well as to the private lives of its citizens. By Vital Democracy there was intended – well, what was intended?

**(4) Something Wrong with Democracy**

We would suggest that although all Common Wealth members are agreed that something was, and still is, wrong with Democracy, there is no general agreement of what that something may be; certainly no reflection of any such understanding in the shaping of the Common Wealth constitution and methods of procedure, which differ in no essential respect from the forms which have brought so many societies and nations to shipwreck during the relatively brief and experimental history of democratic governments amongst modern communities.

**(5) Common Wealth's Contribution to Vital Democracy**

We would go still further to suggest not only that it is in the realm of Vital Democracy that Common Wealth has its greatest contribution to offer, but that in practice, if it disappoints the hopes of those who respond to its early promises, becoming "just another political party", and standing in essence for nothing more than a particular brand of economic theory, it will fail in its vital task of inspiring the liberal minded millions in this country to accept a new way of life.

**(6) The Point of Weakness**

Throughout history Democracy has repeatedly shown itself subject to corruption from within, becoming progressively weakened to the point where it succumbs to the use or threat of force by conqueror or dictator. We must ask ourselves where is, in practice, the point of weakness; what is the fundamental problem? And we shall find that the real difficulty, which has never yet been solved, is to make quick and effective action by the executive consistent with proper examination of the problems with which it has to deal and effective control in the interest of the electorate.

**(7) The Task of an Executive**

The task of any Executive is to implement the general policy of the organisation it represents, to reshape, or adapt, or bring to perfection that policy in part or as a whole, in the light of the current situation, to re-consider it where necessary in the light of opinion within its membership, and to deal quickly and effectively with the many new tactical problems arising from day to day.

**(8) Not Enough Time**

Experience shows, however, that in a political movement such as Common Wealth this is an immense task which no single body of men can effectively carry out, if only for the simple but sufficient reason that they haven't enough time. In practice it is found that the pressure of current events presents such immediate and overwhelming calls upon the time of the executive that they are unable to spend nearly enough time either in formulating policy or in exploring opinion amongst their members. The call is for men of action, first, last and all the time, and these men of action, duly elected, quickly develop, though often unconsciously, a strong resistance to anything which may seem to slow down or impede that power first to make, and then implement, the quick decisions which the occasion almost always calls for.

**(9) The Power to Act**

Executives, in short, want power – power to act – and are always concerned to get more power. And in this fact lies the seed of corruption and the greatest peril to democracy.

**(10) Tendency to Abuse of Power**

The danger is that, having been given the power they need, an Executive will proceed, first to use it in pursuit of policy which, even though formed in the general interest, has not the support of their members, and then to make criticism ineffective or impossible by abuse, or undemocratic amendments, of the constitution. The Labour Party today (1945) is a dreadful illustration of this process in a late stage of development. Common Wealth's greatest contribution to the politics of today can lie undoubtedly not in the economic sphere, where we have fundamentally nothing new to offer, but in the shaping and practice of Vital Democracy. We suggest that the problem of giving effective voice to opinion in the ranks without impeding the Executive's power to act quickly and decisively when necessary in the interests of the movement as a whole, provides our great task and our great opportunity.

**THE NATURE OF DEMOCRACY**

(11) Before we proceed to the examination of this problem it will be well to make some comment upon a difficulty which must always arise from the very nature of the democratic idea.

**(12) Democracy Means Discussion**

If the people are ever, in fact, to govern themselves – and this must surely be our practical objective – they must have a form of Government which provides them not only with the means of making their will effective, but also with the means of forming an intelligent majority opinion (in a Common Wealth Society, where self-interest is at a minimum and education at a premium, bare majority decisions will tend to give place to unanimity). This can only mean a large-scale development of the habit and opportunity of discussion. We can imagine no other way in which opinion can be exchanged throughout the community upon a given set of facts. Exchanges of memoranda, the only possible alternative, are slow and clumsy in committee and literally impossible for general application.

**(13) A Short-sighted Criticism**

Democracy, in short, compared to Dictatorship, must, by its nature, be relatively both slow and verbose. This is the one defect of its outstanding virtues, and a true democrat must accept it. We can therefore have neither sympathy nor patience with the attitude of mind which, stigmatising Parliament or any other democratic institution as a "talking shop", considers that the last word has been said.

**(14) The Lesson of the U.S.S.R. and the Object of Sensory**

Rather would we submit that is the true purpose of Democracy effectively to organise the maximum amount of talk amongst the greatest number of people! Indeed, the U.S.S.R., it has been suggested, owes much of its striking progress in the practice of economic democracy precisely to the Russian people's very marked, indeed inordinate, delight in discussion, an activity which in that country, everywhere plays a predominate part in the social life of the common people.

The sensory organisation which we envisage in this memorandum is thus a practical attempt to organise discussion and to keep the Executive in touch with the resultant body of informed opinion throughout the membership in a way which, far from impeding or holding up its work, will in fact greatly facilitate it.

**CONVENTIONAL FORMS – WHAT IS LACKING?****(15) Men are of Two Kinds**

We have said that the case for action must dominate the average executive. We would add to this that it is not in the nature of the human brain normally to excel in two such different spheres as deliberation, or logical thought, and quick decision or power of action. Moreover, even exceptional personalities, possessing both qualities in marked degree, cannot expect to develop either one to its greatest potential, except at the expense of the other, and when we describe Executive members as being necessarily men of action, we mean not that, given the opportunity, they cannot be capable of creative thought, but simply that, whatever their nature, they are not given the opportunity.

(16) It is therefore not enough that we elect our best men to the Executive. *Something more is required.*

**(17) New Channels**

We must devise some simple machinery whereby, in relation to any problem, all the relevant facts can be not only made known to the Executive, but submitted in a pre-digested form by some completely objective body concerned not with policy but with facts. In this process of pre-digestion the membership, through branch and region, will play its part. The machinery we set up, which will largely perform the function of the Sensory Nerve System in the human body, will provide free channels of communication between the central executive and the organs and limbs – i.e., the committees and general membership – which it controls. These channels do not exist in the conventional democratic forms which Common Wealth, albeit calling loudly for Vital Democracy, has taken over unquestioned from the other so-called democratic organisations of our day. Its function in seven words will be "the proper integration of thought and action".

**(18) Democracy is Difficult in Large Communities**

Before we translate this idea into terms of committees and procedure, let us examine this conventional form of democratic Government. In a large community, unable to meet together as in Ancient Greece, and to vote by a show of hands, great power must on the one hand be relegated to a relatively small body of rulers and lawmakers while, on the other hand, the organisation of opinion will have to be elaborately decentralised at the

cost of expensive and unwieldy machinery. This is one of the unavoidable problems of Democracy. Its danger is that the task of mobilising local opinion and of making it effective at the centre becomes more difficult in proportion to the size of the community, so that in the vast societies of today the executive, controlling the forces of law and order, and governing by decree, often in practice divests the individual member of any effective part in Government or power of protest.

(19) **"Government by Consent" Impractical**

Government "by consent" is, it is clear, a practical impossibility, and modern democracy has temporised by requiring a generalised form of consent, by means of periodic elections, at stated intervals, while keeping comparative freedom of action in between. but this system has shown itself to be subject to serious abuse, especially in a period of rapidly changing conditions, besides divorcing the electors too completely from close and lively interest in, or control over, current legislation, and so leading to a dangerous state of general apathy and political ignorance.

(20) **Present-day Procedure**

In Common Wealth, the chain of communication between the National Executive and the member is made up of the Region and the Branch, with their Executives and sub-Committees. A member wishing to promulgate an idea must first submit it to his branch. If he makes his case there, the Branch is expected to persuade the Region. The Region, if it approves, may then either submit the case to Headquarters or prepare the ground more thoroughly by canvassing other regions. In each case the idea will be kept alive only if it is approved by a majority vote, for which purpose it has to be cast in the form of a resolution or a memorandum, thus losing fluidity and precluding amendment as it progresses towards the National Executive. As the arguments which gained the day in the Branch and perhaps in the Region cannot be effectively carried further by word of mouth, it is on practice highly unlikely that a new idea of any difficulty will be favourably received or fairly considered in the upper circles of the organisation.

(21) **Ideas must be Kept Fluid until Perfected**

No idea of importance can achieve satisfactory finality in its interpretation and application unless it can be promulgated by methods which allow of the widest and most penetrating examination, both of the argument and the facts upon which it is based, at all stages. the system which demands that it must be reduced to a concrete proposal, backed by a majority vote, before it can find a wider audience, inevitably closes its own creator's mind to relevant criticism, helps to perpetuate any errors or weaknesses which it may contain, and thus leads to its undeserved rejection or to its adoption in a form which in practice may be found to be either unworkable or contrary to the interests of the community.

(22) **Executive its own Judge**

In the case of complaint or criticism it is possible for a case to be submitted via Region direct to the Executive. But here we have the position that the people whose action is criticised have to act as judges of their own conduct. Unavoidably they must approach the discussion with a self-defensive bias. Sensory, by submitting *all* relevant evidence and by correcting misinformed criticism can hope also to protect the Executive from the human

tendency either to distort or to overlook uncomfortable facts which are relevant to the case and thus to ensure a really objective attitude and a just decision.

**(23) Where is the Proper Place for Discussion?**

At the Annual Conference where the members have the power to decide, through the votes of their representatives, the main lines of policy, it is, in practice, impossible to do more than state a case already prejudged and record the vote. Debate or discussion proper is impossible in the time and the Conference should not be looked upon as the proper place for it. Nor should the Executive, as they often do, add new proposals to the Agenda without ample warning to the Branches.

(24) Where then is the proper place for discussion, and how, without meeting in Conference, can the opinion of the whole membership be canvassed? This question, the technique of discussion, though in a sense it is a separate problem in itself, is closely related with the case for a Sensory Committee. The exact relationship, and the appropriate machinery, are in process of consideration and cannot be developed further here.

**(25) Sensory not a Court of Appeal**

We can say here, however, that it is not intended that a Sensory Committee shall itself exercise an Advisory function or issue judgement on matters at issue within the movement – functions which, if it laid claim to them, would call for a staff of supermen, besides seriously prejudicing its claim to exercise no power, but to exist primarily as a channel of communication.

**(26) Outline of a Sensory Committee**

We may now attempt to envisage the part which a Sensory Committee would actually play in Common wealth, and the kind of people it would call for. Arising from what has already been said, we may submit the following descriptive comments.

**(a) OBJECT**

Its aim will be to integrate thought and action, so that the Executive is kept in continuous touch with the members and is thus able both effectively to act with the knowledge of their agreement and support, and to be aware of current opinions as to past action.

**(b) FUNCTION**

To achieve this object it is suggested that a Sensory Committee will: -

- (1) disseminate and co-ordinate new ideas throughout the movement;
- (2) classify the facts and supply relevant data in all matters of controversy or dispute;
- (3) keep the Executive informed of opinion both within and outside the movement;
- (4) co-ordinate and initiate specialised discussion and research.

(c) **NATURE**

To achieve objective truth Sensory must be careful not to exercise any power and thus by infringing the prerogative of the Executive to prejudice the conditions of its work. For this reason we consider that it should eschew even the claim to an advisory function, for if it agreed with the executive its ruling would become in effect unchallengeable, while if it opposed it the moral authority of its decisions would in practice give it effective power to influence the decisions of the Executive and this would not only create antagonism within that body but would ultimately corrupt Sensory's own outlook and practice by giving them a sense of, and a desire for, power.

(d) **PERSONNEL**

Where no advisory function is claimed we shall not need men with a great body of political experience a quality which is demanded *in excelsis* of the Executive.

We shall look rather for qualities of mind and personality – minds that are judicial in outlook, possessing a scientific attitude to fact; clear thinkers capable of contemplation, yet able to act decisively; balanced personalities, open-minded to receive criticism of self or friends, yet self-confident enough for decision. The first and last question must always be "Is it true?" In short, we want the Socratic attitude to life.

(e) **MEMBERSHIP**

We envisage about six founder members, with power to co-opt. Suitable members are not necessarily those likely to be known throughout the movement for their executive activities. Probably regions should make nominations and in the event of competition the National Committee should make the final selection.

Continuity would be important and we envisage terms of service of at least five years.

(f) **LIAISON**

Liaison with the Executive is essential. Sensory would have the right to a non-voting representative on all national committees and vice versa. Experience would show to what extent these bodies would exercise this right.

(g) **AGENDA**

Any individual member of the Common Wealth would have the right to submit an idea, a problem, a complaint, or a criticism for consideration. Sensory would investigate and exercise its discretion, whether to accept and to refer to national Executive, Regions, or Policy Committees for consideration or to reject, giving reasons.

Any committee, including the National Executive, wishing to refer any matter for wider consideration, or research as to facts, would submit it to Sensory.

All complaints or criticisms would always come before Sensory for comment as to fact before consideration by the Executive. In the same way complaints by the Executive of Branch or Region Administration or Personnel would go to Sensory for examination.

**(h) RIGHT TO INFORMATION**

Sensory would receive minutes of all meetings of its Executive counterpart. It would have the right to call for any other minutes containing matter relative to its business, and the right to take evidence as to facts both of time and action in matters of controversy.

**(i) CONSTITUTION**

The general outlines of the necessary constitutional changes can be seen from the foregoing paragraphs. We shall hope to draft amendments for submission to the 1946 Annual Conference in due course.

(27) Illustrations may help to focus the picture of Sensory which we have been trying to put before you.

We have attempted to envisage possible activities and to illustrate from past history of Common Wealth in an Appendix to this memorandum.

**(28) Answers to Criticisms**

Most of the criticism which the Sensory idea has yet to deal with arises from misunderstanding of its purpose and nature.

Following are the main grounds for objection: -

- (a) That it proposes to separate thought from action.
- (b) That it is not true to say that it would not compete for power with the Executive.
- (c) That it would hamper the Executive.
- (d) That Common Wealth has few men with the necessary qualifications and they are all needed in Executive work.
- (e) That we cannot afford to waste time on discussing Policy when the political situation calls for all our energy in the electoral field.
- (f) That it would be just another talking shop.
- (g) That it would duplicate the function of the Appeals Tribunal.

(29) Objections (a), (b), (c) and (d) may be taken together because they all fall to the ground once it is realised that Sensory disclaims any advisory function. It is a pity that it was ever tentatively described as an "Advisory2 committee, but the idea of its sponsors had not at that stage crystallised nearly so definitely to their present conclusions.

(30) Regarded in the light of this memorandum Sensory is clearly designed to facilitate rather than to hamper the Executive's power to take quick decisions with confidence that they are right. The decisions will still be entirely those of the Executive. Sensory's function will be, as we have said, to integrate thought and action in the Executive rather than to separate them or to undermine either the Executive's responsibility or authority with the members.

(31) Had Sensory been called upon to deliver judgement, as a sort of High Court, it can be admitted that objection (b) in particular might have had relevance. But this is not so.

(32) Objection (f) is typical of the mind which thinks of politics in terms only of power to act quickly rather than of ability to act rightly. We believe we have already said all that need be said here.

(33) Objection (g) misunderstands the function of Sensory. The sole approach to the works of the Appeals Tribunal might be to recommend the services of that Tribunal to some appellant who has submitted a complaint for consideration.

**(34) Conclusion**

Common Wealth is not the kind of movement in which the general members are content to meet once a year to be told what the policy of the movement will have to be for the next twelve months. Vital Democracy, if it means anything, must mean that every member of the community is not only anxious to play his part in shaping policy and controlling his Executive, but is able to do so without disrupting the movement or hampering its leaders in their essential day to day decisions.

(35) It is our submission that present-day democratic machinery is so unequal to this task that (largely because of the pressure of time) any member or branch intemperate or determined enough to press opinions at Headquarters, is bound to be heard with reluctance if not with hostility. In the Sensory Committee we have attempted to devise a simple machinery which may go far to overcome this difficulty, and, in doing so, to bring Executives and members everywhere into closer understanding and contact and thereby into far greater unity and mutual confidence than is ever found in practice today.

(36) It is the essence of Sensory, if and when it comes into being, that it will have no axe to grind. Once this is fully realised we are convinced that all opposition will disappear and that members and executive alike will turn with relief and complete confidence to a body upon whose disinterested and self-critical attitude they can rely, in order to save themselves from the intolerable inefficiencies and abuses of Democracy as it exists today.

## APPENDIX

### THE WORK OF "SENSORY"

*In the notes which follow, we have endeavoured to group under their main headings some of the various functions which Sensory can perform. We hope that we shall be found to have said enough to suggest that there is indeed a vast and poorly explored field here for work of the greatest value to Common Wealth in particular and to the cause of Vital Democracy in general.*

#### (A) NEW IDEAS

In the realm of new ideas the only real antithesis between Sensory and Executive becomes apparent, because whereas the natural tendency of a busy Executive is to resist suggestions for change, it is the first duty and interest of Sensory to welcome every new proposal on its merits and to examine it sympathetically with a view to discovering whether it really contains an idea which can be of value to the community. It is precisely in this, of course, that Sensory provides its chief justification and demonstrates its overwhelming need.

Members having suggestions concerning policy, organisation, or constitutional changes, could ask Sensory to examine them with a view to organising their exploration and development throughout the movement, if there seemed to be sufficient basis for such action.

Branches, having adopted a member's idea would proceed in the same way.

Sensory, being concerned with absolute values, and not with a time table of action, will therefore present an open mind to all ideas, however novel or difficult and therefore apt at first sight to be written off as "cranky". No suggestion would be rejected until after discussion with the sponsor, by a representative of S.C., technically or professionally qualified to apprehend both his object and the means of attaining it.

Logical or factual defects in the argument, whether observed by Sensory or reported back to it, would be pointed out to the applicant for his further consideration.

#### (B) LONG-TERM POLICY

In the same way a policy proposal for which support in other Regions was required would be submitted to Sensory for appropriate action: e.g., submission to existing Policy Sub-Committee, circulation to Regions of Branches or, if it tied up with current business, direct submission to the National Executive.

**(C) CURRENT TACTICS, PROPAGANDA, PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS, ETC.**

Sensory, being in receipt of, and encouraging, comment of all kinds from members and Branches, would keep the National Committee advised of current feeling and opinion amongst members and their immediate reactions to topical events.

It would also give warning of untrue or undesirable impressions or reactions amongst the general public.

**(D) THE TIME PROBLEM – ORGANISATION**

Head Office may find it impossible to act democratically because it must act quickly. It is often required, for example, to institute at short notice a new organisational scheme which involves new records or forms of return for Branches. Regional and Branch opinion *should* be ascertained. But there is no time, so it cannot be done – at any rate by formal reference back through the usual channels. *Result* – practical points missed; inconvenience in Branch working; irritation and criticism all round.

One of Sensory's first concerns might be to compile an index of Branch and Regional officials who are willing and able to attend at Head Office at short notice, or to reply postally by return, or to meet locally in other Regions. These could produce very quickly constructive comment on Head Office proposals which would result in an amended version of the proposed machinery, suitable to Branch and Regional requirements as well as those of Head Office.

**(E) THE TIME PROBLEM – SPECIALISED INFORMATION**

Machinery precisely parallel to that which is outlined in (A) can be used to provide the Executive or Policy Sub-Committees, etc., with technical, professional or other specialised opinion in relation to current issues of all kinds.

**(F) INTERNAL DISPUTES AND DIFFERENCES**

*In all matters of dispute Sensory's task is to promote agreement and not to take sides.* Internal differences of all kinds are envisaged in sub-sections (i) to (v) which follow. It is important to realise that in relation to such matters the task of Sensory is solely to discover facts, leaving the question of judgement to the appropriate body. It should be especially stressed that it is no part of Sensory's duty to criticise its Executive counterpart.

In all matters of dispute the National Committee would be even more likely than a member or Branch to call upon Sensory to discover the truth and to report accordingly. When members and committees throughout the movement realise that they can rely on Sensory for unbiased reports as to fact, much misunderstanding and loss of time, temper and confidence will be saved.

**(i) Organisational Defects, etc.**

National Committee's time is too precious to discover *the facts* for and against Branch complaints about Head Office procedure, conduct of individuals, unfair treatment of Branches, defective organisation, etc.

If such matters came before them with a brief summary of the ascertained facts from a disinterested body, just decisions would be quick and easy.

Incidentally, where these facts did not appear to support the complaint, it would be referred back to its sponsor with the relevant information and would only reach the National Committee if he remained unsatisfied.

**(ii) Accusations of Bad Faith or Lack of Common wealth Principles or Conduct Prejudicial to the Movement**

The same procedure as in (i), including the collecting or collating of all available evidence from first-hand witnesses, would save enormous waste of time and temper.

We stress this question of temper. There have already been occasions when many hours wasted in accusation and counter accusation, without previous sifting of established facts, have led to so much impatience and irritation on the National Committee as to hinder wise action or just and unprejudiced judgement.

**(iii) Criticism of the executive**

Members of an Executive, if they are to work together effectively, will naturally be loyal to one another and will find it difficult to meet criticism from outside with impartiality.

This is a special example of (i) in which the preliminary work of sensory would be of especial value.

**(iv) The Constitution**

Constitutional controversies or queries would be referred to Sensory for an opinion. Suggested amendments would be considered for a report on their probable effect. Opinions would probably only be given after ratification by the National Executive.

**(v) Minority Opinion**

Branches or Regions wishing to explore and to agree on minority opinion about current national policy, or lack of policy, or Head Office procedure, etc., would take action "via Sensory", it being remembered that Sensory's concern with

relevant facts includes all facts about the state of opinion throughout the movement.

Here again Sensory's duty is to make possible the effective examination and expression of a minority opinion which could not otherwise obtain a hearing at a national level, and which might through prejudice or factual error crystallise prematurely in a distorted, undeveloped or even malicious form if no machinery existed for collating facts and comparing similar points of view from other sections of the membership, in an objective and unbiased spirit.

Once such opinions were finally crystallised it would be no part of Sensory's duty to further them as against the views already held by the majority. For the purpose of action there already exist effective democratic channels of expression.

**HOW SENSORY COULD ACT: SOME EXAMPLES** – omitted, as relevant only to a national organisation, with executives and sensory committees at branch, regional and national level, instead of the version developed for and within Braziers.