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From the Private Secretary

30 July 1987

INDEPENDENT PRODUCERS

The Prime Minister thought that members of MISC 128 might like to see the transcript of exchanges on the Today programme about independent producers and the BBC. The exchange between John Humphreys and Brian Redhead is particularly revealing.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to the members of MISC 128 and to Trevor Woolley (Cabinet Office).

David Norgrove

William Fittall, Esq.,
Home Office.

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PRIME MINISTER

INDEPENDENT PRODUCERS

You might like to see the transcript attached from the 'Today' programme, about independent producers working for the BBC. The exchange between Brian Redhead and John Humphreys is revealing.

It might be useful to circulate this to colleagues at Misc 128.

Yes

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29 July 1987

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JOHN HUMPHREYS REDHEAD - CONVERSATION ON MICHAEL GRADE INTERVIEW

Transcript from: BBC Radio 4, Today, 29 July 1987

HUMPHREYS: I noticed Brian that when you talked to the Director of Programmes, Michael Grade, earlier you were very modest. You didn't mention the fact that you yourself have been involved in an independent production last week.

REDHEAD: Well it came as a great surprise to me too. An old friend rang me up and said would you like to come to Crewe station and make a programme about railway trains - which I always say yes to - and it turned out that was indeed an independent production. It's exactly like making a non-independent production I have to say, except perhaps you get on with it a bit faster.

HUMPHREYS: Well there's money at stake. From Brian and me good morning.

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MICHAEL GRADE - INTERVIEW ON BBC INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION

Transcript from: BBC Radio 4, Today, 29 July 1987

INTERVIEWER: (BRIAN REDHEAD) The BBC will today announce details of the television programmes that it intends to commission from independent producers. Now in the trade this is seen as a great change but will the viewer notice any difference. Well with me is the Director of Programmes for BBC television, Michael Grade. First of all, how many programmes are we talking about?

GRADE: Well today's package there are about 45, 50 programmes.

INTERVIEWER: And how much money is involved?

GRADE: Nearly £5 million.

INTERVIEWER: And are there no go areas, I mean are independent producers excluded from certain activities?

GRADE: Only news related programmes, obviously like the 9 o'clock News, Newsnight, Breakfast Time.

INTERVIEWER: But not current affairs as long as its faintly historical?

GRADE: Well it can be topical, it can be current, certainly.

INTERVIEWER: Now when you get an independent production what does that mean in terms of the viewer? Does it just mean there's another name at the end of the programme?

GRADE: Well no, we hope it will lead to more choice for the viewers because in the past the BBC's always had a monopoly of programme making. There are now lots of very talented people who don't wish to work inside the BBC or inside ITV and want to be what are called independent producers and run their own little businesses and create their own programmes and not be subject to the discipline of BBC programme department.

INTERVIEWER: But is there any evidence that they will produce programmes markedly different from the programmes that they produced

when they worked inside the BBC or inside ITV?

GRADE: I think that will happen yes because in order to make a sale to the BBC independent producers have got to identify gaps in our output. And that of course will lead to better choice for the viewers.

INTERVIEWER: But if they suggest something, a gap in the output, you with all those producers to pay could say well wait a minute we could do that ourselves, why don't we just pinch the idea?

GRADE: No because we will obviously be reducing our programme making capacity in order to pay for the independent production.

INTERVIEWER: You mean putting people out of work?

GRADE: No, no. Over a period of time the BBC will shrink, just through natural wastage.

INTERVIEWER: But why are you doing this? Is it just because the Government insists?

GRADE: No, because the talent wants to work that way. The BBC is in the business of getting the best possible programmes for the viewers from wherever it can get them. And these days a lot of highly talented individuals don't want to work inside the BBC. They want to be independent producers. The BBC has a duty to get programmes from those people because they are the best programme makers in some cases.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard though independent producers whimpering that the decision making process is complicated and you really need to understand the BBC in order to sell them something?

GRADE: Although there's bound to be a year or two as they get to know how we work and we get to know how they want to work - Channel 4 went through all this in the beginning because it was Channel 4 that started the independent production business. They're bound to be teething problems.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a danger though of falling standards? The BBC

has always had, it is said, a reputation for producing high quality television in the professional sense, will it be upheld?

GRADE: Well this is an experiment and over the next 3 years we'll be producing about 12% of our output with the independents. At the end of that 3 years we will look back and see whether the independents have matched up to the quality and the standards that we expect and whether or not their programmes we hope are going to be a little bit cheaper.

INTERVIEWER: You said 12%, eventually you've got to make it 25?

GRADE: Well at the end of 3 years what we've said is that we will review what has happened in the 3 years, whether the cost and the quality of the programmes is what we have expected. And then we'll review it in the light of what the Government's requirement is of 25%.

INTERVIEWER: One final word on this point, cheaper, is it in fact likely to produce ^{cheaper} in the sense of not costing as much?

GRADE: I sincerely hope so yes.
