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PRIME MINISTER

BROADCASTING BILL

Thinking about the timetable for the Broadcasting Bill, I wonder whether we are trying to compress too much into too short a time.

The present plan is to publish a White Paper at the turn of the year and to legislate in the next Session, 1988-89. However, this means that decisions will have to be compressed into the busy period leading up to Christmas. The results of the BBC, IBA and DTI study of the possibilities for MMDS and Channel 5 will not be known for at least ten weeks. It will also be difficult on this timetable to take into account the results of the studies commissioned from consultants on the Peacock recommendations which bear on telecommunications policy. These are not due to come forward until the end of the year. Yet changes to the ITV system, including the levy, cannot be made until 1 January 1993.

The present timetable will have legislation going through the House just as Astra is beginning to have its effect on British television and as DBS is getting underway.

Against this background there seems to me a strong case for proceeding more slowly. One option, for example, might be to publish a White Paper around Easter next year, to legislate on the Broadcasting Council and, say, radio, in the 1988-89 Session and to follow with the rest in the Session 1989-90. This would allow the final decisions on broadcasting to be taken in late 1988 and early 1989. Alternatively, all the legislation could be taken in the 1989-90 Session, provided that the Broadcasting Council and other safeguards on standards could operate satisfactorily in the meanwhile without formal statutory backing.

There would be an incidental advantage in transferring a meaty Bill from the second to the third Session of the Parliament, which is likely to be lighter.

I have discussed this idea with DTI, who would feel a sense of relief if more time were allowed (Alistair MacDonald told me he has at present a feeling of galloping towards Beechers Brook), and I do not think the Home Office would complain.

Clearly, in view of the Manifesto commitments, this needs to be thought about carefully. I recommend that the Home Office and DTI should be invited to prepare a paper on the timetable and the options for the next meeting of MISC 128.

Agree?

*Yes - Very much so*

*mt*

*Dhw*

David Norgrove

30 September 1987