

Ref. A089/902

PRIME MINISTER

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Ministerial Group of Broadcasting Services (MISC 128)

As you know, MISC 128 is due to start work again on 20 April, when it will have the first of the three or four meetings that will be needed to take the final decisions on the forthcoming Broadcasting Bill, in the light of the response to the White Paper that was published last November. We shall submit a full brief for the first meeting for you to consider over next weekend, in the usual way.

2. In the meantime, I understand that the Home Secretary may wish to raise the following two procedural matters about MISC 128 when he has a talk with you next Tuesday.

Participation of Mr George Russell

3. First, the Home Secretary has suggested that he should be accompanied by Mr George Russell (present chairman of the IBA and chairman-designate of the Independent Television Commission) when MISC 128 considers the new competitive tender procedures for independent television franchises. Mr Russell is the architect of the IBA's proposals on this difficult matter, and the Home Secretary thinks it is important that MISC 128 should have the opportunity of probing the IBA's proposals in detail. If the Home Secretary makes this suggestion, I suggest that you say

that there is no objection to Mr Russell attending the relevant meeting to make a presentation, and answer questions, but that he should withdraw before Ministers reached their conclusions. (Mr Russell is, after all, a prominent player in the scene that MISC 128 has to regulate, and he has intimated that he might wish to resign if the Government's eventual decisions are not to his liking: there could be criticism if it became known that he took part in Ministers' taking of their decisions.) Such an arrangement should satisfy the Home Secretary.

#### Membership of the Group

4. Second, we understand that the Home Secretary may ask you to consider expanding the membership of the Group for the forthcoming second stage of its work. He may suggest that the Scottish Secretary should be asked to join, and also that permanent membership should be extended to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Education Secretary (who were both invited to attend the Group's last meeting before the White Paper was submitted to the Cabinet).

5. I believe that there is, indeed, a good case for now including the Scottish Secretary, who has independently approached the Secretariat, through his officials. It is becoming clearer that there are special Scottish considerations in a number of broadcasting issues, including ownership, transmission, and franchising. In addition, the question of Gaelic broadcasting is assuming greater importance. Taken



overall, the Scottish Secretary's interest does not now look much less than that of the Welsh Secretary, who is already a member of the Group.

6. Expanding the Group beyond the addition of the Scottish Secretary would, however, significantly change its balance, and it is not clear to me that either the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary or the Education Secretary will necessarily have the sort of continuing departmental interest that would justify permanent membership. I think that you would strike the right balance if you suggested that these two Ministers should be sent the papers of the Group, on the understanding that they could attend as necessary for the topics under discussion. You might wish to propose a similar arrangement in respect of the Northern Ireland Secretary, who has not made any approach to us, but who clearly has interests similar to those of the other territorial Ministers.

7. So I recommend that the Scottish Secretary should be added to the Group, whereas the Foreign Secretary, Education Secretary and Northern Ireland Secretary should receive papers but only be invited if matters affecting their departmental interest were at stake.

F.R.B.

ROBIN BUTLER

7 April 1989