

cc Mr Whittingdale  
Professor Griffiths

~~MR GRAY~~

BROADCASTING OF POLITICAL MESSAGES

You sought my views on the Home Secretary's minute re the handling of this issue in the Broadcasting Bill.

I can see the logic of the Home Secretary's proposals in the light of the changes in the licence arrangements but I wonder whether it is wise to draw a distinction between Ministerial and election broadcasts on the one hand and party political broadcasts on the other.

A particular regional licensee could surely argue that if they do not transmit any party political broadcast (as a matter of principle) they are being absolutely impartial, especially when it is already difficult to achieve satisfaction among all parties. It may be well nigh impossible to do so in future with the advent of the Greens as a political phenomenon.

It could be argued the other way that the legal requirement to put out politically balanced programmes should also ensure balance over Ministerial broadcasts, especially election broadcasts.

Consequently, I wonder whether we are inviting more trouble by distinguishing between party political and Ministerial and election broadcasts.

One further point arises: the criteria governing different categories of Ministerial broadcasts, Questions of Procedure for Ministers (Para 124 section 3, attached) sets these out. You will see that at present the IBA is not obliged to relay either type - ie with or without right of reply by the Opposition - of Ministerial broadcasts transmitted by the BBC, but if they do so they are obliged to give right of reply and also to arrange a discussion programme. Ministerial broadcasts are of course extremely rare. There has not been one since May 3, 1979. But we need to ensure that the rules governing them are incorporated in the Bill.



BERNARD INGHAM  
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124. Radio and television broadcasts by Ministers are of four types: Party political; Budget; special broadcasts by Ministers; and interviews with Ministers for news and feature programmes:

- (a) Party political broadcasts on radio and television within the Government's quota are arranged through the Chief Whip acting on behalf of the Prime Minister.
- (b) Budget broadcasts (by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and a member of the Opposition in reply) constitute a special series of Party political broadcasts. These are arranged through the usual channels and agreed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
- (c) The broadcasting authorities may provide opportunities within the regular framework of their programmes for Ministers to give factual explanations of legislation or policies approved by Parliament, or to seek the co-operation of the public on matters where there is a general consensus of opinion. The Opposition have no automatic right of reply. The British

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) may also provide the Prime Minister or a senior Cabinet Minister designated by her with an opportunity to broadcast to the nation to explain events of prime national or international importance or to seek public co-operation over such events. These are traditionally known as "Ministerial" broadcasts. The Opposition have the right to make an equivalent broadcast in reply. In this event the BBC will arrange as soon as possible for a broadcast discussion of the issues involved. A member of the Cabinet, a senior member of the Opposition, and, if they so desire, representatives of third parties with appreciable electoral support would be invited to participate. The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) is not obliged to relay either type of special broadcast, but if they transmit a "Ministerial" broadcast they must also take any Opposition reply and arrange a third stage, the discussion programme. Proposals for a special broadcast of either type should be referred as soon as possible to the Chief Press Secretary at No. 10. The Leader of the House of Commons and the Chief Whip should also be consulted. No approach should be made to the BBC or to the IBA for a broadcast of either type without the approval of the Prime Minister.