

BROADCASTING BILL: REQUIREMENT FOR POLITICAL MESSAGES

Over the Summer, you saw a proposal from the Home Secretary for the handling of political broadcasting under the new régime. These involved a requirement in the Broadcasting Bill for licensees to show Ministerial announcements and Party Election broadcasts; but to allow normal Party Political broadcasts to continue to be governed by the general "balance" requirement.

You were doubtful about this and commented that:

- The Government should try to keep to the present non-statutory basis for all these types of broadcast.
- You did not see the case for distinguishing between Party Election broadcasts and normal Party broadcasts.
- You would be content for a general "balance" requirement to be included in the Broadcasting Bill.

The Home Secretary has now reconsidered and his minute at Flag A (attached) makes new proposals. He now says:

- There is no problem for the BBC, Channel 4 and S4C, because these will continue as public service broadcasters operating the existing voluntary arrangements.
- But for Channels 3 and 5 there will no longer be a body like the IBA with whom national guidelines can be agreed. The ITC will act simply as a licencing body with no power over the schedules. So it is necessary to have a requirement in the Bill for Channels 3 and 5 - and new national radio stations - to carry political broadcasts.
- All types of political broadcast should now be treated in the same way, rather than attempting the distinction originally envisaged.

- A general requirement for balance would not avoid a situation where one Channel 3 licensee showed Party Political material while another refused.

- If you are content, he will now seek to reach agreement on these lines with the Opposition Parties.

Since the Home Secretary sent this minute last week, it has emerged that there is an existing committee, chaired ex-officio by the Lord President as Leader of the House, for the consideration of such issues with the Opposition Parties. The committee has not met for over six years, but is the obvious vehicle for seeking agreement on the present issue. The Lord President will now be having an initial internal meeting with the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to consider the handling. But before that preliminary meeting, he would welcome your views on the latest proposals.

Two other papers are attached:

- At Flag B a minute from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's Office indicating his support for the Home Secretary's proposals.

- At Flag C a note from Bernard, in which he questions why local radio is excluded from the Home Secretary's proposals whereas the new independent national radio stations are included. I have discussed this with the Home Office and I think the key point is the local/national distinction. At present, local radio does not carry Party Political material and it is intended to maintain that position.

1. Are you content with the broad shape of the Home Secretary's latest proposals and for the Lord President to carry forward discussions with the other Parties as appropriate?

Yes
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OR

2. Any comments you wish to feed in before the Lord President's meeting?

PRCG.
PAUL GRAY

5 October 1989

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