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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

8 June 1981

Sean Fergus,

Thank you for your letter of 15 May enclosing one from Mr N S D Halliwell expressing concern about the media's, and particularly the BBC's, treatment of the Northern Ireland hunger strikers.

I am very much aware (as, I believe, are the Board of Governors of the BBC and the members of the IBA) of the concern which has been expressed recently over the question of the television coverage of events in Northern Ireland. I am in no doubt that the reporting of these events carries with it a heavy responsibility, since terrorism feeds on publicity and terrorist organisations undoubtedly seek to exploit the media to their own ends.

I am also conscious, however, of the difficulty of the decisions for which the broadcasting authorities are responsible, in relation to what should and what should not be broadcast, particularly as regards Northern Ireland. As you know, they have a number of obligations, including the duty of reporting the news accurately and with due impartiality. These obligations are not always easy to reconcile in particular situations, but the responsibility for seeking to reconcile them lies, and should lie in our system of public service broadcasting, with the broadcasting authorities.

This is a two-way process of communication between the broadcasting authorities and the public, and if members of the public consider that the authorities have made mistakes they should let them know, for in the performance of their duties as trustees of the public

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in broadcasting, the broadcasting authorities need to know the views of the public. By the same token, however, the public is entitled to know what complaints the authorities receive and what action they may have decided to take on them. It was for this reason that, only a few months ago, the Home Secretary asked the Board of Governors of the BBC and the members of the IBA, through their Chairmen, to include in their future annual reports information about the number and nature of the complaints they receive and of any action taken in consequence.

I am arranging for a copy of this correspondence to be sent to Mr George Howard, the Chairman of the BBC, so that he may be aware of Mr Halliwell's comments.

*Y
Lourwe*

Ragland

Fergus Montgomery, Esq, MP