

PRIME MINISTER

MEDIA RELATIONS - STOCKTAKING AND LOOK AHEAD

I think it would be useful to you to have this report from the front and appreciation of where we stand with the media after over 3 years of your Administration. It also looks forward over the last 12-18 months of this Parliament and makes proposals for action. These are set out on pages 10, 11, 12 and 13.

ANALYSIS

You enter the Recess on a high note. A Marplan poll, taken at the height of the Buckingham Palace security row, puts the Government 12 points ahead of Labour (45-33%) with the Alliance trailing with 19%. This is a remarkable turnaround but not as spectacular as your Marplan lead over Mr Foot on who would make the best Prime Minister. Your lead here is 27 points (40-13%). David Steel is second with 19% and Roy Jenkins fourth with 12%.

Both the Government and yourself have benefited substantially from the Falklands campaign. It has enhanced the public's positive view of your leadership qualities. That is likely to be a lasting bonus, especially as the Labour Party under Mr Foot seems doomed to disintegration.

The majority public and media view of your Premiership is one of firmness, consistency, determination, sound nerves, a fair degree of frankness and plenty of energy. You project a very strong and resolute image. You are respected and admired rather than liked, but real affection could come later if you persuade us to reform our bad habits and attitudes and lead us, as a revived nation, to economic as well as military success.

You are tapping a vein of commonsense in the people who were never quite persuaded by the post war practitioners of economic witchcraft that hard work, application, quality and honest money do not matter. This partly explains political attitudes with over 3m unemployed.

Not surprisingly, you are also heartily disliked and indeed hated, though still commanding respect. Both the dislike and hatred will intensify the more successful you are, or appear likely to be, because you threaten to burst the bubble of the Establishment's economic and social consensus and, at another level, to snatch victory from the Left wing corporatists who practice the new feudalism of the council house and closed shop.

In short, the public generally are responding to a new, or lost, brand of leadership in the hope, if not yet the belief, that it will be worthwhile. Your merit is that you appeal to their understanding of reality - to their sense of what really makes the world tick. They yearn for British success. They would, deep down, desperately like you to succeed. And they increasingly believe you have luck on your side.

In a curious way, divisions or doubts within your own party are now less of a liability; they may, indeed, contribute to the overall impression of Prime Ministerial courage and will.

I believe you are held in much higher regard than your Government which, leaving aside those outrightly opposed to all its works, is felt to be:

- weak on law and order;
- weak on control of public expenditure or indiscriminating in its cuts, or both; and more generally
- to be a rather uneasy coalition of views with a pronounced soft centre that is only prevented from melting by your icy hand.

The media reflects and magnifies all these views of your leadership and Government. This mirror also distorts. For example, there is not much left of the short fuse on which you are supposed to operate. Your image is harsher than reality largely because you have not yielded to high and rising unemployment. And your Government is popularly presented as a cutter and slasher regardless of the truth - eg, in hospitals. This distortion often results from laziness or convenience rather than malice. The media finds it much easier to run on the tracks formed by cliches.

It has not, for example, abandoned its search for the great U-turn, though increasingly it expresses the quest in different terms - will you stick it out even in election year? Have you still time or have you left it too late?

In other words, the temperature is hotting up. Your media supporters will display increasing anxiety over the coming 12 months. Your media opponents will exhibit increasing hostility and hysteria the more you look like winning with a high (but probably necessarily a falling) level of unemployment. And in these circumstances the more the point of attack is likely to change.

On the assumption that the Falklands inquiry gives you a reasonably clean bill, there are four major pressure points:

- unemployment;
- trade unions;
- law and order;
- EC budget.

The media would not generally be behind an assault whether over pay or trade union privileges. But it would find much more seductive campaigns against your law and order record or any sign of weakness in our approach to the rapacious EC. By the same token there are political prizes to be won from strengthening the nation's moral fibre by inculcating discipline and more parental control and staunching the flow of our substance to keep the Continentals in the luxury to which they have become accustomed.

In essence I see greater risks in my dealings with the media in a relaxation of your grip than in continued firmness of purpose and touch. But that resolution needs to be complemented by a reversal in the trend of unemployment, linked with a continuation of the trend in inflation, before confidence really takes off. It would also help if we could develop your caring image in a genuine, non-gimmicky way,

To summarise so far: You enter potentially the last year of this Parliament in a dominating position with your capacity for leadership in peace and war proven. You now have 12 months in which to convince the people that your cure really does work, is turning the country round and that you are building a Britain to their liking. That in my judgement is where the media will pick up the threads in September/October.

RELATIONS WITH THE MEDIA

You go into this crucial 12 months with reasonably good relations with the media - certainly better than those of many Governments at this stage of a Parliament. This is not to say they are cosy or even in a state of armed truce. But they are not in a state of open conflict or even of incipient or intermittent war. We co-exist in a rather loveless but not unduly rancorous state. There is some respect on both sides. There are many worse marriages. We get by because the Government, taking one week with another, does not take the media too seriously.

Your office's relations with the Press, and more especially the Lobby, thrive on this basis. So do those of the better Departments. [The MoD's difficulties over the Falklands campaign are seen as the isolated consequence of war, though they are partly symptomatic of a wider information problem which cannot now be dealt with in this Parliament].

We should do nothing rash to change what is, all things considered, a fairly satisfactory state of affairs.

But we should recognise and take due account of four factors:

- declining professional standards in the media partly as a reflection of society itself and partly for technological and doctrinal reasons. (I explain below);
- your relatively distant relations with the media;
- the politicians' general unhappiness with broadcasting, and more especially television; and
- the impending expansion of television over the next 12 months linked with the advent of a new and probably more adventurous Director General of the BBC.

I deal with each point below.

Declining Standards

It is a sad fact but no informant can now be sure that a journalist will protect his source. This collapse of standards, while by no means universal, is not always to the immediate disadvantage of Government. But it is unhealthy, increases distrust and tension, and gets in the way of legitimate communication. The Lobby is now a transparent institution and the losers are its members collectively as distinct from individual members whose integrity remains untarnished.

There is no reason why journalism should have been immune from the general decline in standards. But that is an inadequate explanation of the current phenomenon.

One important reason for it is that unattributable briefing leads an uneasy existence in the broadcasting era. The newspaper journalist understandably sees no reason why he should be bound by Lobby rules when the self same briefer has said it all 10 minutes later on radio or television.

Another reason is the continuing, if relatively dormant, campaign within the media for open Government. This causes all unattributable or off-the-record guidance to be treated with suspicion. And in some cases it breeds journalists who are prepared to abuse trust in pursuit of the "loftier" aim of openness.

Finally there is that section of journalism which hourly prostitutes its art in support of a pressure group and against authority and, as with the more rabid demanders of open Government, considers all's fair in love and this particular war.

No Government can expect to continue to enjoy our present reasonably good relations with the media without being aware and adapting to the circumstances set out above. Nor without recognising that in an election year the pressures and tendencies will intensify.

Your Relations

Your relations with the media reflect your relatively casual approach to press, radio and television: you don't run after them; you don't allow them to become too familiar; and generally you keep them at arm's length. You do not manifestly seek publicity or headlines. And you are not obsessed with their failings, real or imagined. (Sanity in dealing with the media is only preserved by taking the long view.) All this is healthy. It has served you well. Long may the regime continue.

It is, however, important to recognise that the run-up to an election will test this approach. It must also be acknowledged that you will be expected by your colleagues and party soon to move into a higher presentational gear.

It falls for consideration whether you should continue to ignore opponents in the media - eg, Observer, Guardian, Mirror - simply on the grounds that they are ranged against you. There is a school of thought which sees some value in your tilling stony ground when the fertile plain will blossom on its own.

Broadcasting

Politicians generally are unhappy with broadcasting and to a much greater degree with television. This is largely because of the undoubted power of television as a conveyor of ideas and impressions. But the unease is compounded by the demand for balance on the box - a balance they do not expect of and indeed would be astounded to discover in the press.

In my view we expect too much of our television when its clear purpose is to entertain, and certainly not to bore - and when the sheer inflexibility of the medium means that a current affairs producer is almost bound to set out from a prejudged position.

A much more serious charge against television is the extent to which it creates and distorts news by its very presence. Your regional progress, for example, would not be dogged by demonstrators but for the cameras. But it can convey a picture of regional unity and support which may belie reality simply by screening the happier parts of any tour.

It is up to Government (and party) to harness or channel the medium to its advantage. Like the bomb, we cannot disinvent television even if we wanted to do so. We had therefore better learn to live and work with it, infuriating though it can often be. I make some suggestions below.

#### Expansion of Television

These suggestions are made against the background of an impending substantial expansion of television. The developments are set out in more detail in Annex I. In essence they add up to the launching of:

- Channel 4 on November 4, with news supplied by a special ITN service;
- breakfast TV on 2 channels:
  - BBC 1 getting in first in January with a single national Today-type programme 5 days a week;
  - TV AM, the commercial version, starting early in the New Year and broadcasting seven days a week.

These innovations will intensify the competition with the media and the demands upon the Government - Ministers and Information staffs alike. They will not merely extend working hours; they will also require a different approach. Putting it at its lowest, it is one thing to do a radio broadcast from home at 6.45am; it is entirely another matter to present yourself effectively on TV at that time.

The pressure on Ministers will be intensified if, as is possible, the new Channel/programmes bring a less politically balanced approach to broadcasting. There are some - Hugo Young, in the Sunday Times

last weekend, for example (see Annex II) - who suggest that all pretence at balance should be dropped. If it were, relations between Government, the parties and broadcasting would be initially, at least, more difficult. But Ministers would feel under more compulsion to appear on programmes, especially in the run up to an election, simply to ensure that every opportunity is taken to get the Government's point of view across.

Ministers and Departments need to be alerted to these developments and to agree an approach which will need to be modified in the light of experience. I make proposals below.

### Issues

Whatever media developments there may be, it is possible to identify the main (inter-related) issues which will preoccupy us over the next 12 months:

- the Franks Report; ideally we need a convincing vindication of the Government, recognising that this will make your opponents all that more desperate;
- unemployment, pay, inflation, trades union reform - our economic performance; ideally we need a low single figure pay year, inflation declining, unemployment on a downward track, an increasing ability to compete and further democratisation of the trade unions;
- public expenditure, defence budget, "cuts" in services, taxation and local rates; ideally we need a firm grip on expenditure complemented by modest rate demands, lower taxation and a better public understanding of so-called "cuts";
- crime and punishment; law and order; ideally we need a riot-free year, racial harmony, a turn in the serious crime statistics, a growing demand for a more disciplined society and a more reassuring performance from some sections of the police;
- membership of the EC and budget reform; ideally we need our partners to develop a sense of fair play, grasp the nettles of CAP and budget structure and so allow the Government to sell a commendable Europroduct to the hostile British customer.



It does no harm to state the ideal. But it is dangerous to imagine we shall achieve it.

Two things are required in the circumstances of the next 12 months:

- an early, if necessary confidential, insight into election presentational strategy: what product do you propose to sell?; and
- closer and more systematic attention within Government to presentation, especially of the five factors set out above, in line with the chosen electoral strategy; either the Government is the most cavalier I have known with presentation or it really does assume I am getting on with it and is content to let me do so.

#### Organisation

This brings me to the organisation required to do an effective job in what could be a very difficult year, notwithstanding your flying start as evidenced by Marplan.

After 3 years in my job it is clear that overall presentation can only be co-ordinated and prosecuted effectively from No 10 under your authority. It is equally clear that it will not be done effectively unless Government and party march in step. And it is equally clear that the gap between the two promotional centres - No 10 and CCO - can only be bridged properly by a Minister with a day-to-day foot in both camps.

As such, Angus Maude's contribution was underestimated. The potential of the Chancellor of the Duchy is not realised because of a real presentational problem over his party chairmanship.

The fact is that this Government has now not had a Cabinet Minister taking a close, active and positive interest in presentation and its co-ordination for close on 20 months. We need therefore to identify

what is acceptable and desirable and what is unacceptable and undesirable, not to say damaging. It would be unacceptable and counter-productive, especially in an election year, for Mr Parkinson to be put in charge of presentation of Government policy. It is however desirable that he, as a member of the Cabinet, should take an interest in how the Government is being presented and it is acceptable that he should further that interest, under your broad remit, by regularly consulting with and advising me as the official responsible for co-ordination. This would cause no change of existing Ministerial responsibilities; merely an arrangement to secure better co-ordination.

Under that umbrella, I would be helped by a specific instruction, which I could transmit to Heads of Information, to keep under review and develop proposals for the presentation of the areas set out above - economy, public expenditure, law and order and EC, plus Franks as necessary.

One further point: you have dispensed with media briefings since the Falklands. This is unhelpful to me. I can well understand your wish to dispense with large meetings which run on. But an opportunity briefly to run through the week ahead (Monday) and the weekend ahead (Friday) on the basis of the single sheet agenda which I already prepare is invaluable and will be all the more necessary over the next 12 months. You may prefer to confine any such meeting to 10-15 minutes, with only the Principal Private Secretary and CDL also in attendance.

#### PROPOSALS

The proposals or suggestions set out below are based on the experience of the last 3 years and the likely needs or demands of the final 12-18 months of this Parliament.

#### Strategy

1. The Government machine will do a better presentational job over the next 12 months the sooner it understands your strategy - the product you intend to sell to the electorate.

Organisation

2. The Chancellor of the Duchy and I should develop a close but relatively informal working relationship without any change of Ministerial responsibility.
3. Monday and Friday media meetings should be re-instated on a restricted basis with 10-15 minutes set aside for a prepared agenda.
4. You should instruct me to keep under review with my Information colleagues and bring formal presentational proposals to you (via CDL and Liaison Committee) in the main areas of the economy (of which pay is an important element); public expenditure; law and order; and the EC.
5. Ministers should have at an early date in October a note on the expansion of television, with a recommendation on how to approach the developments; work is in hand on this.

Press

6. You should see the Lobby at the beginning of the Session - ie, early in November - to look ahead to what could be election year. Its chairman, Jack Warden, is a friend and has already extended an invitation to you. The Lobby is no worse than any other group of journalists; it does serve as a convenient conduit for Government; and you have a vested interest in being on better terms with political correspondents in an election year.
7. For this same reason, you should offer the Lobby a party at No 10 preferably early next year.
8. You should consider whether there would be advantage at an appropriate time during the year in offering a party to particular groups of journalists covering key areas - eg, home affairs, education, technology, women or perhaps a combination of groups.
9. Lunches for editors at No 10 or in their offices are a valuable means of communicating your attitude and policies. There are two approaches - only to take on supporters or as well to attempt some missionary work among opponents. Frankly, I would advocate the latter,

especially as and when unemployment turns down. You will need to exploit every opportunity in the 12 months ahead,

10. Lunches at No 10 for editors of the regional media are a good investment and you might usefully offer hospitality during the year to those from Merseyside, Manchester, Bristol/South West or the North East.

Radio/Television

11. You should at this stage adopt a cautious approach to Channel 4 and breakfast TV. Channel 4 is at once potentially interesting and damaging because of its suspected bias towards women and against the Government party. Breakfast TV will need to prove its worth in audience terms. We should not be stampeded by either development; let us play them for advantage.

12. You will need to contemplate a few extended interviews in the course of the year. (NB: Robin Day is returning to Panorama): But you should aim principally to be seen to advantage on news programmes doing useful things or identifying with helpful causes; it is not length of exposure that matters but regular exposure, in the right light, especially when Prime Minister's Question Time is such a marvellous medium for conveying thoughts, ideas, concepts. We need to give particular thought to the photographic potential of regional and other visits.

13. Given that the premium will be on salesmanship in the course of the 12 months ahead, you ought to consider setting aside a little more time on regional visits for local editors/radio, provided we can persuade them to raise themselves above narrow local preoccupations.

14. However disinclined you may be to do it, you should in your own interests take an early opportunity to meet Alasdair Milne, Director General, BBC; Jeremy Isaacs, Chief Executive, Channel 4; and John Whitney the new Director General of IBA.

Overseas

15. This is not the period for devoting too much time to the international media or affairs except to the extent that it serves your domestic objectives. A visit to the Falklands, for example, could do just that. So could successful visits to world leaders; the country derives a sense of well-being, if nothing else, from seeing its Prime Minister operating confidently in good company. But we shall need to watch very closely the presentation of any Euro-encounter or any visit which has difficult implications at home.

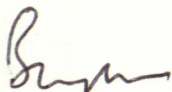
SUMMARY

This paper concludes that you are better placed than you might reasonably have expected to be well into the second half of this Parliament. It shows that you have reasonably good relations with the media which are above par for the course. But a real challenge lies ahead with a major expansion of television. We should approach this cautiously.

Your preoccupation in the 12 months ahead will be with domestic policies and you need to consider whether it is time to spend some time on missionary work with the media. To sharpen up presentation we need to forge a better link between Government and party through the Chancellor of the Duchy. And you and the Government need to take presentation more seriously over the year under review and to give me stronger backing as co-ordinator at official level.

You will no doubt wish to spend more time on putting over your point of view.

I would be grateful for your views and clearance in principle to develop a media programme on these lines for the 12 months ahead,



B. INGHAM  
3 August 1982

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MEDIA

Brian Mower has prepared this more detailed note on the above. He writes:

There is little doubt about the extensive implications for Government - Ministers and Information Staff - with the opening up of cable and satellite television in five years or so. It will increase both the opportunities and the demands. The expansion of teletext services and home video also need to be monitored as well as the ever-shortening lead times to transmission. Televising of Parliament remains a possibility.

Our immediate concern is with the introduction of the fourth television channel in November and breakfast television early next year. They will undoubtedly impose extra demands which, in the absence of further resources, imply changed and improved practices. In a sense they provide a limited foretaste of the larger changes in organisation which we shall need to consider in future years.

Channel 4

This starts on 4 November with a single national (except Welsh language) programme, from mid-afternoon (early afternoon at weekends) to late night, seven days a week.

I suspect that the programming may well adapt after not too long. The immediate lack of commercial pressure leaves one with the feeling that some initial ideas may not survive: for example, they plan two current affairs programmes produced only by women.

Most important from our point of view, is the news from 7-8 each evening falling between the early and late evening news broadcasts on existing channels. With the minor exceptions below, it will be produced entirely by ITN but with an entirely separate news gathering team (eg, Elinor Goodman and Ian Ross). Thus there will always be a third demand for television interviews, a third set of journalists seeking a different angle, a third television channel to monitor. It may also be that, because of the intended minority audience, they may

go both wider and deeper than existing television news journalism: thus there could be additional opportunities to present particular areas of policy.

The extra ITN contributions are:

1. a short 3-4 minute slot from Monday-Thursday for an "alternative voice";
2. a full half hour (7.30-8.00pm) on Fridays for an outside organisation to present an aspect of the news that has not adequately been covered during the week. I suppose that, in extremis, we could try to utilise this if we felt that the Government had been unfairly treated.

Other current affairs programmes will afford additional opportunities - as well as inevitably lead to additional demands from time to time.

#### Breakfast Television

There will be breakfast television on both channels from early 1983. The nature and potential advertising income of the medium implies greater competition than exists at present for breakfast radio; and it will be both as between television companies and between television and radio. This suggests that demand for Ministerial appearances may expand by considerably more than a factor or two.

#### TV AM

- It is important to grasp the main difference between the two programmes. TV AM (ITV) is an entirely separate company; BBC is an extension of existing services. Thus, although both will be gathering their own early-morning input, TV AM regard themselves as an entirely separate news gathering service. If there were a major news event of the day, TV AM might demand filming facilities, in addition to BBC and the two ITN teams - ie, potentially 4 in all.

From a superficial examination, TV AM certainly appears to be preparing to compete far more vigorously than its rival, as may well befit an organisation which has to pay its way in the world. It is

broadcasting seven days a week; BBC intend operating only 5 days a week. It has lined up five "names" as presenters: the BBC is thinking about it. It plans to have five Electronic News Gathering (ENG) units in London, six in the region and about 100 journalists operating when it opens in February: no details yet from the BBC.

BBC

BBC's producers of breakfast TV intend to get in first by starting in January. They are part of the BBC Current Affairs Department and will call on those facilities. Thus, news gathering will be part of the overall news gathering arrangements, and ENG facilities will be available for outside interviews.

They will be on BBC Channel 1 with a single national programme from 6.30 to 9.00am five days a week (not weekends). The programme, which as yet has no name, will be of the Today format with at least half-hourly news bulletins interspersed with light to medium current affairs items and interviews. Of course they will prefer interviews and discussions in their Lime Grove studio but will send out ENG teams as necessary. They are not at present ready to announce the name of their presenters.

They will be staffed for 24 hours a day and we shall have extra demands both from the News Department and the programme's own editors. This will occur throughout the day but also, of course, at night particularly after first editions are available.

Implications

There will be greater pressure on Ministers perhaps beyond the proportional increase in airtime because of extra competition. It will include the entirely new problem of early morning television appearances. Pressures will intensify for being ahead of the news. In particular, TV(AM) - and thus BBC Breakfast TV - will try to be ahead of other companies.



Inevitably this will mean more night-time activity as editors hold back discussions of exclusives until the last Fleet Street deadlines. Thus there will be even greater expansion of demand on the time of information staffs, handling bids, accompanying Ministers, dealing with additional enquiries at all hours, monitoring and analysing broadcasts.

All of these issues need to be thought through in terms of attitudes, mechanics and practices. Heads of Information are to discuss on September 13 preparatory to putting a paper to Ministers.

General. But because the Cabinet is formally limited

ever he can, he still runs four miles a day and would

Premier and protégé: private moment in public

dining club whose members swapped essays before

tious young meritocrat, Norman Tebbit, then a prices

POLITICIANS care enormously about politics on television. Although they rarely watch the box, being hard at work during peak viewing hours, they know what they don't like. They think most voters receive their perceptions of political reality via television. And they believe, despite the absence of real evidence, that political action—in a word, the vote—is thus determined. Their complaints, when they are being polite, are invariably about a lack of "balance". As Parliament shuts down, television is preoccupying party managers more than unemployment or the Falklands inquiry or even the date of the next election. You get a taste of this from the stubbornly disproportionate efforts the old parties are making to deny the SDP anything like an equal balance of broadcasting time when the election comes.

But a deeper menace looms: the arrival within the next few months of breakfast television and Channel Four. Already leading politicians, especially on the government side, view this with trepidation: more outlets, requiring more appearances and likely to cause more trouble. They are preparing the kind of massage and manipulation to which existing BBC and ITV producers are so well accustomed.

I HAVE a radical proposal to save their time. It is that the new outlets, if not the old, should publicly and con-

sciously renounce a commitment to political balance, as presently practised.

Balance, of course, is essential if it means fairness in the selection and presentation of news. News programmes must try to avoid every trace of political bias. The effort must always be, however imperfect the result, towards objectivity; and here BBC and ITN news bulletins put the reliability of most Fleet Street newspapers to shame.

But in other respects, broadcasters are not like newspapermen. They speak a different language. The very words permitted to television reporters drain them of individuality: never a colourful jibe, a risky adjective, an explanatory irony. The supposed neutrality of television has created a journalistic idiom which I hope the new outlets will prove their novelty by reforming.

Political balance, however, is at the heart of the matter. It's an emasculating concept. We've moved some way from the days when every BBC programme had to put a Labour MP side by side with a Tory. But within short spans, equal time is considered critical. Stopwatch and calculator rule. A strong argument must always be matched against an opposing strong argument.

Two effects of this are especially conspicuous. One is that political television,

whether in discussions or documentary reporting, often has an anaemic and inconclusive quality: as if the producer is afraid to point to any striking conclusion, lest it offend the sacred concept of balance.

Secondly, balance is a condition which tends to be achieved on scales with very short arms. The range of political opinion most customarily heard runs roughly between the two main party leaderships. Outside that frame, people do not appear often, and then with a slightly freakish air. Tony Benn made a telling case in his Guardian lunchtime lecture the other day: in a time of ideological ferment, the public gets a very limited diet of ideas, and in particular knows nothing of the substance, as distinct from the horror-stories, of debates on the left.

I hope the new outlets find ways of escaping from this timidity, and allowing one side its argument without instantly anaesthe-

tising it. To do this they will need to redefine balance. But another reason too now makes balance an unreliable guide.

One definition of it often heard around the BBC is that it consists of being attacked simultaneously by Mr Benn and Mrs Thatcher. Under fire from the right as a nest of lefties, and from the left as an establishment puppet, surely the Corporation must be getting it about right?

What complicates this otherwise pleasing picture is the ascent of the SDP-Liberal Alliance. Defining balance as being reviled by Labour and Tories carries the implication that somewhere in between must be the right place to be. But since a major political grouping now occupies that ground, all those careful and balanced programmes may begin to look like propaganda, subtle or otherwise, for the Alliance.

THE ACHIEVEMENT of triangular balance, with the kind of agonised refinement

the networks now sweat to master, will be impossible. It certainly won't make for stimulating television. Nor do such defensive rules of journalism necessarily have much connection with arriving at truth.

In challenging them, however, the new channels would face major obstacles, above all from politicians. Politicians' concern is rooted largely in terror. They are frightened of what they conceive to be television's power, and of what effect unorthodox opinion on the screen (about nuclear disarmament, for example) might have on the untutored populace. They would detest the kind of liberation I'm proposing.

If you doubt this, consider the Falklands war. When Panorama gave part of a programme over to MPs critical of the war, the producer was called a traitor and the BBC chairman almost torn limb from limb. The pressure was effective. Very little was televised from the critics after that. It was also shocking. It showed how thin is the average politician's respect for the freedom of broadcasting: how unable they are to accept a deviation from orthodoxies they define.

Equally, it is the ambition of party leaderships to dictate which party members shall appear as spokesmen in broadcast discussions. At

heated moments, such as elections, they exert intolerable pressure on the networks to exclude some and impose others, all to conform with their own preconceptions about what the public should be permitted to see and hear.

The quest for balance is a sort of refuge from such assaults. It provides a talk-out. My point is that it is chimerical: an illusion which inhibits free expression and, with the rise of the SDP, no longer has the merit of ostensible neutrality.

Television should aspire to the condition of newspapers. Newspapers are far from perfect, and not as catholic as they should be. But they can publish any political argument under the sun without politicians calling it an outrage against the British way of life.

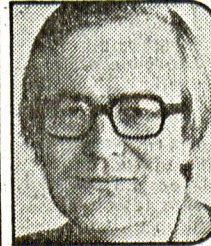
Why can't politicians be so level-headed about television? Partly, no doubt, because the air-waves are public property, now available only under licence and regulation — which makes some politicians believe they have a positive duty to interfere.

But the main reason is that politicians are obsessed with a TV channel's power. They cannot treat it as one of many inputs, on and off the screen, into every voter's psyche. Thus they lunge always for the anaesthetic. Channel Four and the others should take them on. Soon, after all, there will be cable and satellite and do-it-yourself television. What price nanny's balance then?

# Time to be unbalanced

## Inside Politics

by HUGO YOUNG  
Political Editor



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