



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Press Secretary

13 February 1984

Jim Johnson

BBC RADIO 4 "ANY QUESTIONS?"

I have undertaken to write to you after an approach by BBC Radio 4 "Any Questions?" complaining about the proscription, recently reinforced by you, that members of the Government should not take up invitations to appear on this programme; and to leave it as the preserve of Backbenchers.

Mary Price, the current producer, has chosen this time to make the approach possibly because of a change of chairman, from David Jacobs to John Timpson. I suspect she believes that this provides her with a new argument why members of the Government should take up "Any Questions?" invitations - namely, that John Timpson is well known to politicians and will be in an anomalous position on taking up the chairmanship of being able to interview members of the Government regularly on the "Today" programme but have no contact with them in "Any Questions?".

I am not particularly impressed with that argument, but I think you should be aware that the BBC finds no justification for the ban on appearances by members of the Government.

Mrs Price claims that the convention that "Any Questions?" should be left to Backbenchers goes back to 1948 and has long been overtaken by events. There is, she says, no rhyme or reason why Ministers should be prevented from appearing on the programme when they appear on BBC TV "Question Time". In practice, "Any Questions?" suffers severely - and alone - from this discrimination.

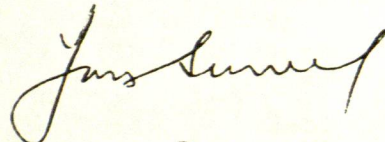
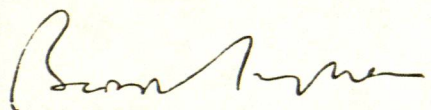
There was no hint from her that the BBC was contemplating making a public issue of the ban, but she clearly reflects such strong feelings about it that we cannot rule it out. In these circumstances, I think we should have a defence prepared.

As you may be aware, Angus Maude reaffirmed the convention when he took office and I have loyally sought to maintain it since 1979. It has however been increasingly difficult the more Ministers have appeared on "Question Time" and other similar programmes. Indeed, Ministers' willingness to appear on "Question Time" makes for much wider difficulty with producers of discussion and audience participation programmes which the Government Information Service would normally advise Ministers to avoid.

After Mr Raison had accepted an invitation to appear on "Any Questions?" at the Royal Commonwealth Society I felt unable to defend the convention any longer. It was at that point that you provided the reinforcement necessary to maintain it.

The problem of "Any Questions?" isolation will not however go away. There may also be very good reasons why it should be preserved for Backbenchers. However, compared with other broadly similar programmes, including "Question Time", it offers a far better opportunity for Ministers to put over a point of view; much more controlled discussion; and minimal intrusion by the audience. This makes for further difficulty in constructing a convincing defence for the Government's attitude to the programme.

You may feel we ought to discuss the situation, perhaps within the Liaison Committee. I am copying this to the Lord President and Alison Ward.

BERNARD INGHAM

John Selwyn Gummer, Esq., MP.