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PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

21 February 1980

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw CH MC MP
Home Secretary
The Home Office
Queen Anne's Gate
London
SW1

Dear Willie,

MINISTERIAL RADIO AND TELEVISION APPEARANCES

I have been examining with the Chief Press Secretary at Number 10 and Departmental Heads of Information the difficult presentational questions posed by 'confrontation' programmes on radio and television. This note sets out our conclusions and I hope that, as a Government, we can agree to accept them as guidelines for the future. It would therefore be helpful if you would circulate this note to your Ministerial team.

First, I should explain what we mean by confrontation programmes. Essentially, they are those programmes in which Ministers are invited to have a discussion with their 'shadows' or other party opponents, with or without an invited audience.

Over the last ten years or more, Governments have generally been against participation in such programmes. There are a number of reasons for this:

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- they raise the status of the opponent and give him a platform he might not otherwise obtain;
 - heated argument, which these programmes often produce, is not usually the best way of getting over the Government's policy; and
 - confrontation, combined with audience participation, especially on television, is calculated more to entertain than enlighten.

The general disposition against such programmes is felt to have served Governments reasonably well. There are, however, counter-arguments. These are notably that:

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- Ministers are in a strong position to win most discussions, and arguments tested in debate are likely to be found more persuasive;
 - the audiences offered by radio and television are wider and more useful than those offered by other media; and
 - a refusal to participate may leave the field to the Opposition, though this need not necessarily result.

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Hon William Whitelaw CH MC MP (contd.) 21.2.80

Our objective, against this background, must be to secure the greatest advantage for the Government, and I agree with Chief Information Officers that some basic guidelines are required if this is to be achieved.

Accordingly, we are agreed that:

- there is little to be said for taking part in studio audience participation programmes and, as a general rule, members of the Government should not accept invitations to do so;
- it is a long-standing convention that Ministers do not take part in the BBC radio 'Any Questions?' programme and this should be maintained; this programme should be left to Backbenchers;
- some Ministers have already appeared on the BBC TV 'Question Time' programme and some have doubted the value of doing so; Ministers and their Chief Information Officers should examine very rigorously what advantage is likely to accrue to the Government from participation;
- phone-in programmes, whether involving direct discussion with the caller or answering queries posed by callers and put by a host - eg the Jimmy Young Show - are a different kettle of fish; these can provide Ministers with a useful means of scoring points and the Jimmy Young Show is felt to be particularly useful;
- as a general rule, Ministers should not confront Opposition spokesmen; it is, however, felt that there may be advantage for junior Ministers in arguing the Government's case in local radio or regional television political discussion programmes;
- there is a strong prejudice against 'fly on the wall' radio and television techniques; this includes a recent proposal by BBC Radio's 'Inside Parliament' to tape Ministerial briefing prior to an Oral Answer and the Minister's subsequent reaction; and against intercutting - ie the dissection of an interview and its edited interleaving with extracts from interviews with other people. This is seldom, if ever, helpful or balanced and should be avoided.

These guidelines do not, of course, absolve Chief Information Officers from securing the best possible deal for their Ministers. But they will be used by the Chief Press Secretary in co-ordinating day-to-day operations. He must, of course, be consulted as set out in 'Questions of Procedure for Ministers'.

I am copying this letter to Cabinet colleagues, Norman Fowler, Paul Channon and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever, *Angus*

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DRAFT REPLY TO SIR IAN TRETHOWAN, DIRECTOR-GENERAL, BBC

Thank you for your letter of July 20 about the practice of Ministers not to appear on BBC Radio's "Any Questions?", even though they do appear on BBC TV's "Question Time".

I am not aware that "Any Questions?" panels are hampered by the absence of Ministers. We have always regarded this programme as the preserve of Backbenchers who invariably give as good as they get.

I would be very reluctant indeed to upset the existing order which I think serves all those concerned, including Backbenchers, pretty well.