

Confidential

B.M.M. (85) ~~26~~ 27
(409 - 422)

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

Minutes of a meeting held on Monday,
29th July 1985 at 12.00 noon in the
Board Room, Broadcasting House

Present: D.D.G. (in the Chair)
M.D.R.
M.D.Tel.
M.D.X.B.
A.D.G.
D.E.
D.P.A.
D.Pers.
D.P.Tel.
D.F.
C.A. to D.G. (for part of Minute 422)

In attendance: The Secretary
Assistant Head of Secretariat

n/r

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n/r

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422. "REAL LIVES: AT THE EDGE OF THE UNION"

Board of Management discussed at length the issues arising from a request by the Home Secretary that the BBC should not show this documentary relating to Northern Ireland, which was scheduled for broadcast on 7th August and about which an article appeared in the relevant edition of "Radio Times", already published. In the course of the discussion Directors adjourned in order to see the film.

D.D.G. said there were two questions to consider. One was whether the BBC should go ahead with transmission despite the Home Secretary's request. The other was whether the proper referral procedure had been carried out in the making of the film. He suggested that, although it appeared there had been a substantial breakdown in the referral procedure, this question should be put to one side for the time being. The immediate need was to decide what recommendation should be made to the Board, which had been summoned for an emergency meeting the following morning.

D.D.G. noted that a formal letter from the Home Secretary was expected that afternoon and much would depend on the terms in which it was written. The approach from the Home Office and a statement to the press by the Home Secretary that day indicated, however, that his concern related to his responsibility for law and order and the campaign against terrorism rather than to his responsibility for broadcasting matters. A report on the Home Secretary's statement was circulated to Directors and the following passage was noted in particular:

"...as the Minister responsible for law and order spearheading the campaign against terrorism I have conveyed to the BBC in the strongest terms that if the press reports are accurate the programme appears to be giving succour to terrorist organisations by the opportunity for public advocacy of terrorist methods by prominent members of the IRA. This gives spurious legitimacy to the use of violence for political ends. It was contrary to the national interest that a programme of the kind apparently envisaged should be broadcast and I have asked the BBC not to do so."

It was also noted that public interest in the

programme had been aroused by an article in "The Sunday Times" the previous day.

Describing the programme, A.D.G. said it was an examination of two extremists at opposite ends of the political spectrum in Northern Ireland: Martin McGuinness, alleged chief-of-staff of the IRA and a successful Sinn Fein candidate both in the elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the local elections in May; and Gregory Campbell, a leading figure in the Rev. Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party who had also won a seat in the May elections. The programme consisted largely of interviews with these two men and members of their families, and its purpose was to demonstrate the polarisation of opinion on the Republican and Loyalist sides. McGuinness made clear in the film that he considered the British presence in Northern Ireland the cause of division and that the IRA was "the cutting edge" of Republicanism. Campbell expressed the view that the only way to deal with the IRA was to kill its members.

A.D.G. said the editorial validity of the programme was that it underlined the irreconcilability of these two positions; he did not believe it could be seen as an incitement to terrorism or as a justification of the use of violence. If the programme had been referred to him he would have recommended showing it; his only reservation would have been about the extent of promotion it was being given in "Radio Times".

In the ensuing discussion Directors considered the merits of the programme itself, the validity of the Home Secretary's misgivings in terms of law and order, and the constitutional implications for the BBC if the Board were to ask to see the programme in order to decide whether it should be shown.

Replying to M.D.R., A.D.G. said both the authorities in Northern Ireland and the BBC there knew about the film and had expressed no apprehension about it. M.D.R. pointed out that the Home Secretary was not responsible for law and order in Northern Ireland; that was the concern of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Home Secretary must, therefore, be worried about the possible consequences on the mainland of showing the film. D.P.A. said both McGuinness and Campbell had been interviewed by the media and their positions were well known in Northern Ireland. He warned of how a decision to withdraw the

programme would be interpreted in the province if it was seen to have been prompted by fears of trouble on the mainland. M.D.R. warned also of the effect on the BBC's own staff in Northern Ireland if it appeared the BBC could be persuaded to withdraw a responsible programme about the province because of a campaign initiated in the press. M.D.R. pointed out that the things said by McGuinness and Campbell in the film had already been heard at the time of their election; indeed, the manner in which these had sometimes been reported at press conferences gave grounds for more concern than the considered way they were presented in the film. It was paradoxical that a programme which sought to put such remarks into a proper context should become the focus of controversy.

M.D.Tel. noted that neither McGuinness nor Campbell had been convicted of any terrorist offence. Moreover, Sinn Fein was a legal party. D.Pers. suspected the government's anxiety over the programme was related to the Prime Minister's recent speech to the American Bar Association, in which she had urged the media to deny "the oxygen of publicity" to terrorists. M.D.Tel. nevertheless felt the BBC could not ignore the circumstances in which the controversy about the programme had arisen. It was the height of the marching season in Northern Ireland and the possibility of an IRA bombing campaign on the mainland during the summer had to be reckoned with. M.D.Tel. reminded his colleagues that it had been decided not to show the play "Ms. Rhymney Valley", about a mining community in South Wales at the time of the miners' strike while the strike was on; the play had, however, been screened recently. Perhaps the "Real Lives" film should also be postponed.

D.P.Tel. said he had not seen the film but he suspected little would be gained by giving it a delayed showing. He suggested an editorially sound procedure that would take account of the controversy surrounding the film would be to transmit it as scheduled and follow it with a "Newsnight"-type debate on the issues it raised. A.D.G. suggested the film should also be prefaced by a presentation announcement making clear that its purpose was to illustrate the irreconcilability of the positions it described. A.D.G. said that if the BBC decided not to show the film it might again find itself carrying an albatross similar to the one it was just about to discard in the shape of "The War Game". Comparisons were also drawn during the discussion with the controversy that had attended "The Question of Ulster" and other programmes.