

ConfidentialB.M.M.(85) ~~27~~ 28.  
(423 - 434)BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

Minutes of a meeting held on Monday,  
5th August 1985 at 11.30 a.m. in  
the Board Room, Broadcasting House

Present: 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.

In attendance: The Secretary  
Head of Secretariat

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

C195

Referring to the previous Board of Management minute (422) dealing with this programme, M.D.X.B. asked that his comments about the grave international consequences for the BBC of any decision not to show the documentary should be recorded. M.D.Tel. noted that M.D.X.B. had also expressed the view that, if the Board watched the programme in advance they might well be opposed to its transmission.

Discussion centred first on the advisability of transmitting a special television programme which would explore the issues of television and terrorism, to be broadcast the following evening - the night before the NUJ "day of protest". M.D.X.B. said he would also welcome advice about a programme in the "Network UK" series which looked at the way the subject of terrorism in Northern Ireland was handled by the British media; it contained interviews with Lacy Faulkner and James Hawthorne (C.N.I.).

D.P.A. felt that, at that stage, a major television discussion about terrorism and the media might limit the BBC's room for manoeuvre. M.D.Tel. thought the programme might have the effect of "tearing the BBC apart" on two successive nights, since it could be followed the next evening by blank screens. D.P.Tel. said that Peter Pagnamenta (H.C.A.P.Tel.) had been told the previous Friday to wait for D.G.'s approval to be given for the programme, and M.D.R. pointed out that the Board of Governors had argued the previous week that any meeting with the Home Secretary should take place in a neutral atmosphere. D.G. said that, on reflection, the television programme should not go ahead the next evening, but that "Network UK" could go out on the External Services.

Turning to the main question of "Real Lives: At the Edge of the Union", D.G. said that, in a conversation with the Chairman that morning, he had been urged to accept that a Board decision had been taken and that it was now up to BBC senior management to rally round. It seemed to D.G., however, that the credibility of Board of Management would not recover until the programme was shown. D.G. said he had seen the programme, and shared his colleagues' judgement that it would be proper to transmit an amended version of the programme; in fact, it had to "hit the air if this place is to run properly". There were, of course, points in the programme which needed amending before transmission, said D.G., and he asked colleagues whether they felt his authority was enough to persuade the Board that the programme should be shown. M.D.Tel. said that day - D.G.'s first day back from leave - was a crucial day, in that D.G. might propose amendments in the programme and the production team would probably accept them; any delay might lead to a hardening of attitudes again. M.D.R. agreed with M.D.Tel., and said a central issue was D.G.'s credibility with BBC editorial staff.

The Secretary pointed out that the Chairman had said in interviews the previous week that the Board had decided the "climate" at that time (a "climate" determined by the Home Secretary's letter and a high degree of press interest) was not suitable for transmission of the film; and he wondered whether, in the intervening days - when press and public reaction to the Board decision had reached a still higher pitch - the "climate" might be judged to have changed

again. The Secretary went on to point out that there had been a number of firm statements by Governors to the effect that the film should not be shown under any circumstances; he considered the Vice-Chairman's views to be crucial, but was not sure whether there was a possibility of the Vice-Chairman changing his mind. D.P.A. wondered whether it was worth asking government for some sort of statement, and D.G. said he would be prepared to go to see the Home Secretary that afternoon to seek an affirmation from Mr. Brittan that he was not trying to impose censorship; but D.G. went on to acknowledge that this might seem to "compound the offence" in that a visit to the Home Secretary at that stage - and in connection with a possible transmission of the film - would be seen as the BBC consulting the government over its editorial policy. D.P.A. replied that, if it could be ascertained, first, that the government would be glad to get the problem out of the way, and, second, that the Board might be prepared to accept D.G.'s advice that the programme should be transmitted (with amendments and in a responsible context), the Chairman might be persuaded to put his weight behind such a solution. The Secretary noted that many senior civil servants in Whitehall were said to be appalled at the government's handling of the matter.

A.D.G. said he believed the damage to the BBC was "immense and nearly uncontainable", and could only be recovered over a very long term: the beginning of that recovery would depend upon showing the programme. More immediately, said A.D.G., he was particularly concerned at the extent to which editorial staff had been unnerved by the previous week's events - he cited a number of examples of programme editors and producers seeking his approval for even the most clear-cut editorial judgements about Sinn Fein, and Northern Ireland in general. A.D.G. believed the decision about transmission of the "Real Lives" programme was a unilateral BBC decision, and government should not be contacted in any way in connection with that decision: the implications of the Home Secretary's letter should be kept separate from discussion about transmission of "Real Lives". A.D.G. said the problem at that stage was to determine whether the Board might agree to the programme's eventual transmission.

M.D.R. and D.P.Tel. asked The Secretary about the Board's likely response to a recommendation from D.G. that the programme should go out. The Secretary

said that, if the Chairman could be persuaded to ask the Vice-Chairman to change his mind, and if the Vice-Chairman did so, other Board members might change their minds as well. M.D.X.B. said that, if the Vice-Chairman would not change his mind, they were in an impasse. D.G. said that, in that case, he might have to consider resigning: "It seems to me I would have to go". A number of his colleagues indicated that, in that case, they would feel obliged to do the same.

D.F. asked whether the Home Secretary could be persuaded to see the film and declare he had no objection to it. The Secretary indicated that, in his opinion, that would be a very dangerous course.

D.Pers. suggested that Board of Management should issue a public statement acknowledging the constitutional rights of the Board, reaffirming its belief that the programme could be transmitted with amendments, defining the context in which they would propose broadcasting "Real Lives", and calling on the Board to re-consider. D.G. said the only new factor in the situation was his own return from leave, and he asked again whether that was enough to swing the Governors. M.D.Tel. recalled that the Vice-Chairman had said at Board that he regretted the "considered advice of the Director-General" had not been available; but M.D.R. pointed out that the Vice-Chairman had also stated that the programme was untruthful and misleading - it would be hard for him to go back on such a judgement.

Discussion followed between The Secretary, M.D.Tel. and A.D.G. about whether attention might be focussed on another programme ("a long programme" said A.D.G.) which would examine the complex issues of media coverage of terrorism. M.D.R. said he felt the problem remained of whether "Real Lives" - in a modified form - should be transmitted; broadcasting the programme would be seen as the only way of "purging" the decisions and events of the previous week.

The Secretary proposed that he should ask the Chairman to talk to the Vice-Chairman as quickly as possible. D.P.Tel. said the only "ammunition" that could be provided to the Chairman was the return of

the D.G. - along with his declared belief that the programme was transmittable, with amendments, and in its amended form would correspond to the policy guidelines established under a succession of Directors-General. The Board might be asked by D.G. whether it wished to overturn that structure of guidelines, and invited to support the considered editorial decision of Board of Management.

M.D.X.E. said he thought the Board should be reminded about the endorsement, contained in the Perry Report, of the editorial independence of the BBC, and said the international reaction to the previous week's decision had been extremely worrying.

After further discussion, The Secretary proposed that he should go to the Chairman and tell him that Board of Management believed D.G.'s return to be a vital factor in the situation, and that his considered advice was that the programme should be transmitted, with amendments and in a responsible context; the Chairman would be asked to consult his Board colleagues in the light of this advice. This was agreed, and the Secretary left the meeting.

Board of Management then discussed the likely pattern of industrial action by the NUJ the following Wednesday. D.Pers. said he thought this would be a "solid show" and that the picket lines would be effective, not only in deterring NUJ members but ACTT members as well. At that stage, said D.Pers., BETA members had been asked not to undertake any work normally done by journalists, but would probably cross picket-lines: it had to be said, however, that there was considerable feeling with the ranks of BETA about the Board decision. D.Pers. said the unions were keen to make clear that this was a 24-hour strike, and would not have any major knock-on effect the following day. He pointed out that it was an illegal strike under the 1984 legislation, but his view was that the BBC should not take out any writs at that stage, since this was a strike which had sprung from "the very heart of the BBC" and from deeply-held convictions by BBC staff. D.G. agreed. (D.Pers. added that ITN might take legal action against their own striking journalists, on the grounds that their action was demonstrably secondary in nature).

In reply to D.G., M.D.Tel. said the extent of the blank screen would depend on the attitude adopted by Presentation Department, and M.D.R. said that news output was, of course, the key in radio: at that stage, he was allowing for the fact that Radio 4 would probably be badly hit, but he would seek to run services on the other three networks. M.D.Tel. said he would try to keep one of the television networks going, and would make sure that "nothing gratuitous" was done to offend Presentation staff. M.D.X.B. said External Services were likely to be in trouble, since the NUJ's decision about a 24-hour strike would affect the full chronology of Bush House output: there were particular grievances in the language services, where staff from overseas, who had experience of heavy government censorship in their own countries, were affronted at the accusation that they were now pawns of the British government. M.D.X.B. said he had urged programme staff to help keep External services on the air, but could not at that stage say what the response would be.

D.E. said that, as long as there were no breakdowns, the automatic switching of transmitters for domestic output should mean there were few problems on the home services. He anticipated, however, that there could well be trouble about switching the External Services transmitters.

A.D.G. said he had received many letters from journalistic staff, whose greatest concern seemed to be that the Board had refused to accept management advice over an editorial matter. Many of them had asked for clarification from the Board as to their exact objections to the programme, and asked that there should be no discussion with the Home Secretary without the advice of editorial staff. A.D.G. said he had replied to the effect that, as a witness to the gravity of the discussion at the special session of the Board, he had every reason to believe that such matters as the previewing of programmes by the Board would remain a most exceptional circumstance; A.D.G. had further replied that the Board emphatically did not wish to intervene in the editorial processes.

M.D.Tel. said he had met members of the Documentary Features Department, and said to them that he believed the withdrawal of labour was pointless. When asked by them what he thought they should do, he

had suggested they write either to D.G. or to himself. M.D.R. said he had received written representation from all the news and factual areas, and also from "front-of-mike" presenters who were not prepared to work on Wednesday. M.D.X.B. said that at a series of meetings with senior editorial staff the point had been made repeatedly that it would now be very difficult to convince staff and audience that the BBC was a straightforward, reputable journalistic organisation broadcasting straightforward, accurate, truthful and responsible programmes.

Board of Management then turned its attention to other matters (see following minutes). When the Secretary returned from the Chairman's office, he said he had first explored with the Chairman the proposition that the events of the previous week had changed once again the "climate" in which the programme would be seen and might mean that the broadcast should go ahead as scheduled. The Chairman had not accepted that, and had made it clear that if an amended programme were to be broadcast, it should be at a later stage. The Chairman had contacted the Vice-Chairman, who had made it clear that he felt more strongly than ever that the lack of referral to A.D.G. and D.G. was an extremely grave matter, and believed that the present crisis might not have arisen if these referrals had taken place. The Chairman had indicated to the Vice-Chairman that management were trying to find a way forward, and were concerned about the Board's relations with BBC staff. The Vice-Chairman had reiterated to the Chairman his belief that the Board should stand fast, and that there should be no early meeting with the Home Secretary (the Chairman thought an early meeting would be helpful, since he wanted to explore the possibility of Mr. Brittan in some way withdrawing the implications of his letter).

The Secretary said the Chairman saw the present crisis as one of enormous magnitude and gravity, and thought it necessary to find a constructive way forward. He had indicated that, if Board of Management wished to invite him to lunch, he would be happy to accept. After discussion, it was decided that the Chairman should be invited to lunch with D.G. and the Managing Directors.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Board of Management re-convened after lunch, D.G. said the Chairman had made it clear that he believed the whole affair had "made nonsense" of the referral system, and that D.G.'s failure to return for the Board meeting the previous week amounted to dereliction of duty. The Chairman had also been extremely disappointed at the lack of any attempt by management to put the record straight about the decisions taken at that Board meeting; and he had also been angered by what he considered to have been unfair editing of BBC television interviews he had given the previous Tuesday evening.

D.G. said he had discussed with the Chairman the possibility of issuing a statement later that day, which would need to be discussed with each of the Governors individually by telephone. If it was accepted, the statement would indicate that the two Boards were agreed there were amendments to be made to "Real Lives" before it was transmitted; that D.G. had asked the Television Service to mount a major debate, to be transmitted early in September, about the problems faced by the media when dealing with terrorism; and that "Real Lives" would be shown during the autumn when the heat of the present controversy had diminished. After discussion about the exact wording of the draft, D.G. went to his office to telephone each of the Governors.

\* \* \* \* \*

When D.G. returned, he said he had contacted seven of the Governors by telephone, and that none of them had demurred from the wording of the proposed statement. One of them, however, had only agreed "with great reluctance" and had asked for a delay of twenty-four hours. The Vice-Chairman had not accepted the wording of the statement, and had considered it would represent a complete reversal of the position adopted by the Board the previous Tuesday. Board of Management then adjourned while D.G. discussed the situation further with the Chairman. When D.G. returned later that evening, he said the Chairman had been opposed to putting out a statement with two Governors unhappy about the proposed course of action, and a Board meeting had been called for the following morning.



424.

n/r

425.

n/r

426.

n/r

427.

n/r

428.

n/r

429. I

n/r

430.

n/r

431.

n/r

432.

n/r

433.

n/r

434.

n/r

n/r

AJ/AJP  
5.8.85