

CONFIDENTIAL  
Restricted Circulation

B.M.M. (85) ~~29~~ 30  
(436)(a)

BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

Minutes of a special meeting of Board of Management  
held at 11.00 a.m. on Thursday, 8th August, 1985  
in the Board Room, Broadcasting House.

Present:           The Chairman (for part of the time)  
                  D.G. (in the Chair)  
                  M.D.R.  
                  M.D.Tel.  
                  M.D.X.B.  
                  A.D.G.  
                  D.P.A.  
                  D.Pers.  
                  D.P.Tel.  
                  D.F.

In attendance: The Secretary  
                  The Deputy Secretary

---

436.     "REAL LIVES : AT THE EDGE OF THE UNION" :  
          DIRECTOR-GENERAL'S STATEMENT TO STAFF (423)

D.G. said the Chairman did not believe the personal statement prepared by D.G. and agreed by Board of Management for issue to staff that morning gave due regard to the position of the Chairman and the Board of Governors. Consequently D.G. had invited the Chairman to join the meeting.

On doing so, the Chairman said he had to convey to management the very strong feelings of the Board. Two Governors had asked for a Board meeting to be convened, which the Chairman was currently refusing. He wished also to express the strength of his own personal feelings.

He had dealt honestly with Board of Management. That courtesy had not been reciprocated. He understood Scottish management were alleging his own statement was not true. He had gone to considerable pains to

agree that statement as an accurate account of the facts with all members of Board of Management. Yet overnight he heard reports that management was vindicated, that the Board had done a 'U' turn and that the "Real Lives" programme would be transmitted in the Autumn. He would not comment on the press cuttings. Some of them were laughable. It was the Director-General's statements which appalled him; not for what they said but for what they omitted. Taken as a whole those statements amounted to a half-truth. They failed to mention the Chairman's role in discussions with the Home Secretary or his achievement in obtaining the assurance there would be no censorship. The Chairman said that during the present crisis he had remained loyal to Board of Management. He had not heard similar expressions of loyalty from Management.

D.G. reminded the Chairman that on the "Today" programme that morning he had spoken of the relationship between himself and the Chairman. At a press conference the previous evening he had spoken at length about the Chairman's role in the meeting with the Home Secretary. He had consistently praised his chairmanship of the Corporation. He conceded that BBC Radio News at 6.30 that morning had reported the position on "Real Lives" inaccurately. That had been corrected at 7.10 a.m. in his own radio interview.

The Chairman said that, nevertheless, history was being rewritten. The fact was the Board of Management had wanted the programme altered and put in context. That was now forgotten. The crisis had been caused by a failure in the referral procedures, - by slack management. The two Boards must now stand together to try and recover the situation. D.G. said Management had every wish to work with the Board in the proper way. A breach had occurred and it must be healed. Staff had little confidence in Board of Management and less in the Board. It would be impossible to recover that situation unless D.G. could speak of the programme going out. He had most carefully stressed that he meant "in due course". He had not resigned and had made that clear to the press the previous evening. He counselled the Chairman not to read the cuttings. All knew from experience that the press consistently misrepresented BBC affairs.

M.D.Tel. said the BBC was now caught up in a "cause célèbre", which had little to do with logic. Staff looked to Board of Management to represent their

feelings to the Board. For years staff had worked in the knowledge that D.G. ultimately made decisions about transmission. They accepted that if staff made errors they were accountable. Now it seemed that situation had changed. The Chairman said there had been no change in the constitutional position. Nevertheless, said M.D.Tel., damage had been done by banning a programme which fundamentally told what was happening in Northern Ireland. He respected the honesty of people who did not believe that was a proper thing to do, but to make any move in that direction was to change the way the BBC behaved.

M.D.Tel. went on to say that he and D.G. had attended a heated meeting at Television Centre the previous day when they had tried to explain matters to staff. They had been conciliatory and had explained the Board's position. He had to say, however, that no-one in the Television Service thought the Governors' decision correct. He had told staff, that management needed their support. The aim was for both Boards to go down the same road. However, if Board of Management tried to say the Board had been right, there would be a confrontation with the staff which would destroy the Corporation.

The Chairman accepted what M.D.Tel. said. But he urged members of BoM to have the courage to tell the whole truth. Going through D.G.'s statement, he said there was no mention of the failure in referral procedures; no reference to the extraordinary step Board of Management took in viewing the programme in advance; no description of their decision that it could not go out without emendation, an introduction and a concluding discussion. There was no public acceptance that Board of Management had also erred, only the implication that the amateurs on the Board of Governors had erred. The Chairman urged Management to have the courage to pull together with the Board and to admit mistakes had been made on their side.

M.D.Tel. repeated that he had acknowledged those mistakes in meetings with the department that made the programme and with departmental heads in the Television Service. It had not been a vicious mistake nor had it arisen from any intention to deceive. The producer and his Head of Department were under enormous strain. They knew Board of Management believed it to be a good programme and the Board thought it evil and wicked. Understandably, they were confused. That confusion extended beyond the

journalists to all members of staff. He begged the Chairman, on behalf of the Board, to consider that concern.

D.G. said he had advised the Board the previous Tuesday of the need to transmit the programme as a means of recovering the confidence of staff. His advice had been rejected. The Chairman said that was not the case. The Board had wished the Chairman to issue his statement on Tuesday as a "confession" of what had occurred; they had ridden out the strike as "penance". The Board had believed Thursday was the day for D.G. to bring the staff back on side. They had had a successful meeting with the Home Secretary. The fresh start signalled by Thursday's statement from the Director-General should have included a reference to that success as well as an admission of failure on the part of Board of Management.

The Chairman then read through D.G.'s statement. He believed the first two paragraphs unworthy in their attempt to score points but would not object to them. The fourth paragraph correctly stated the position of the Director-General as the Editor-in-Chief. Page 2 began with a criticism of the Board he was willing to accept. D.P.A. said it had been included in the knowledge the Chairman, too, had warned the Board of the effect their decision would have on perceptions of the independence of the BBC. The Chairman said he had failed to persuade the Board of that point of view, as had the members of the executive who were present. The Chairman said he did not dissent from page 2 of D.G.'s statement. It was page 3 which seemed to whitewash Board of Management and failed to include any reference to the fact that on first considering the programme Management had decided it needed to be amended and put in context. He believed staff would have more confidence in a Board of Management prepared to accept part of the blame for the present crisis. He urged Board of Management to consider whether they were not equally responsible and should publicly acknowledge the fact.

A.D.G. said he wished to state that it was quite unacceptable for the Chairman to suggest the Board of Management was not loyal. Management recognised the referral system had not worked. Over the past fortnight he had considered more than once the question of loyalty. He reserved the right to return to the issue.

The Chairman said veiled threats were not constructive. Management would forfeit the respect of staff if they were unable to see they must share the blame for the crisis.

M.D.Tel. returned to the problem of restoring the credibility of the Corporation in the eyes of its staff. Unless the Chairman wished Board of Management to resign, and he did not believe that was the Chairman's wish, he must allow them to take hold. The Chairman said the Board had confirmed on Tuesday that D.G. was entitled to make a decision on transmission in due course and accept responsibility for that decision. The Board had not agreed to Management's desire to issue a statement saying the programme would be transmitted in the Autumn. Yet the early news had included just such a statement. He would have preferred the story to lead with the Home Secretary's acceptance that there could be no censorship and for D.G. to have said the programme needed amendment and would be shown in due course. The Board had not indulged in any 'U' turn. He expected that proposition and confirmation of the accuracy of the Chairman's own statement to be included in D.G.'s statement. Management had agreed the factual basis of the Chairman's statement. They should extend the courtesy of ensuring both sides told the same story. He read out a Press Association story timed at 10.29 that morning which he assumed emanated from the BBC and which did, indeed, coincide with the Board's statement. Should not D.G.'s statement do the same? A.D.G. said he did not know the provenance of the PA story. It was presumably a genuine attempt by the press office to keep things consistent.

M.D.X.B. said no member of BoM had wittingly failed to tell the truth. Directors had explained the constitutional position to staff, defended the Governors and described what had happened. They had admitted mistakes and no-one had impugned the motives of others. It was now a question of what degree of emphasis should be placed on the failures which had occurred. If the Chairman thought D.G.'s statement was a whitewash it would be sensible to consider whether it gave that appearance.

D.F. suggested the Chairman was trying to say that if the referral procedures had been followed correctly, the programme would either not have been made or Board of Management would have reached a different decision and that subsequently BoM was simply closing ranks.

The Chairman said he was making no such suggestion. But he was sure no sensible person would have agreed, - in the context of events in Beirut and the Prime Minister's recent speech on terrorism and the media, - to the article about "Real Lives" which had appeared in Radio Times. If the proper referral had taken place, the programme would have gone out, but less conspicuously and, possibly, at a later date. D.G. was appointed as Editor-in-Chief to take tough decisions. He had not been alerted to a problem and a mistake had been made. The system had not worked and as a result had failed to protect both Boards.

The Chairman asked D.G. to include in his statement a reference to the fact that the Chairman's statement had been factually correct, to acknowledge that errors had been made by management and to include acceptance that the film should be changed before transmission.

He went on to say that he did not intend to listen to any more broadcast coverage and hoped to be able to leave the building that afternoon without the need to return to London until Sunday. He could not, however, agree, at this stage, to the Secretary's suggestion that he ring members of the Board and confirm there would be no emergency Board meeting the following Thursday. The Chairman then left the meeting.

Following discussion, Board of Management agreed to make the following additions to D.G.'s statement:

Page 1, Line 3, after "Union" insert "The facts as stated there are correct".

Page 3, Line 5, after "duty" insert "There was, however, a failure to observe the detailed guidelines at the highest level".

Page 3, Line 7, after "can" insert "and should".

PH/rhw  
9.8.85