

PRIME MINISTER

STRATEGY GROUP

BIAS AT THE BBC

The Central Office study on the BBC and ITN coverage of Libya is about to be published at a very difficult time: first because the BBC has to put its own house in order following the withdrawal of its defence of **Maggie's Militant Tendency** and, second, because of strained relations between it and Central Office.

Maggie's Militant Tendency

In dealing with previous major charges of bias the BBC felt it has had a legitimate defence: in Real Lives on the grounds of resisting censorship; in The Falklands War on the basis that the author Curteis omitted to send some crucial letters to the Governor at the same time as sending them a dossier on the case; in the **Monocled Mutineer**, on the basis that a radical left interpretation of history reflects the views of many modern playwrights and that in any case the Corporation shows a great deal of traditional drama (Dickens, Coward, etc).

But in the case of the **Maggie's Militant Tendency** there is simply no defence. The BBC is open to the charges that it failed to prove its central thesis (namely that the extreme right had successfully infiltrated the Parliamentary Party), that it used film regarding Hamilton purporting to represent a meeting of Tory Action, knowing full well at the time it used it that it was of another occasion (Oxford Station Party), that such editorial control as exists was clearly ineffective and that the management totally bungled the court case.

This is accepted by a number of weighty journalists and officials within the Corporation and as a result a major row is taking place over how to deal with unprofessional conduct.

The Governors meet next Thursday to discuss this matter.

What the BBC Governors need to do

First, they need to discipline those responsible - journalists, producers, researchers, editors, Director of Journalism and ultimately the Editor in Chief, the Director-General himself. In fact it is difficult to see how in the longer term the DG can survive this episode. There is every hope to expect them to take firm action.

Second, a new DG needs to begin to appoint new faces to key positions in News and Current Affairs, with different standards of integrity and professionalism.

Third, together they need to establish a new ethos within News and Current Affairs which introduces greater objectivity - quite different from simply being pro-Conservative or pro-Government - and more like ITN.

The Risks over the Libya document

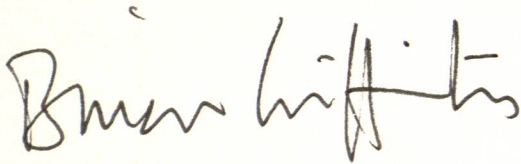
The major risk we run is that if Mr. Tebbit is perceived to be launching a major attack on the BBC next week this will unite the various factions within the Corporation, who will feel duty bound to rally to the flag of resisting outside political interference. This runs the risk of preventing disciplinary action from taking place.

This we must not do.

Questions for the Meeting

1. Should the Libya document be published or sent privately to the Governors? Or should publication be delayed?
2. Is it advantageous for the Chairman to launch a major attack? Or should he act in a statesmanlike way, more in sorrow than anger?

These are very difficult issues. My personal but rather hesitant view is that, as a first move, the document should be sent privately to the Governors, with an accompanying letter which recognises the difficult problems they face, written from a standpoint of real statesmanship and desisting from scoring Party points. A future move would then depend on the Governors' response in putting their house in order.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brian Griffiths". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

**BRIAN GRIFFITHS**

24 October 1986

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