



Prime minister

The draft written answer at A sets out the Home Secretary's objectives at the next conference on the allocation of VHF frequencies.

It includes a proposal for the creation of an independent national radio. Content that he should publish this answer before the Easter recess, subject to colleagues' views?

Yes

PRIME MINISTER

VHF BAND II AND INDEPENDENT NATIONAL RADIO

Over the next decade the amount of the radio spectrum available for VHF broadcasting will double. This is because in 1979 the World Administrative Radio Conference extended the upper limit of VHF broadcasting Band II from 100-108 MHz, so that the band became 88-108 MHz. Next year the detailed frequency plan for the extended band will be settled at a further international Planning Conference. The UK proposals will have to be in a more or less final form by the late summer of this year in order to allow us to co-ordinate our plan with those of our neighbours. We need shortly to announce our general aims for the conference, and although any changes will not take effect for several years that announcement may attract public interest. You and other colleagues may therefore like to know what I have in mind to announce by means of an arranged PQ.

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The new spectrum should become available for broadcasting purposes in 1990 and 1996. This should enable us to have two additional national networks; to improve the coverage of the existing ones; and to continue with the expansion of BBC and Independent Local Radio. The BBC and the IBA have each asked for a new network, and I have decided that we should aim to have both networks available in 1990. (This gives the benefit of greater coverage to most listeners, and avoids what would have been a potentially awkward choice between the broadcasting authorities.) I have already told the BBC that one network will be allocated to them, to provide separate VHF outlets for Radios 1 and 2. These are the two BBC radio services with the largest audience, and it is a long-standing grievance that they have to share VHF frequencies.

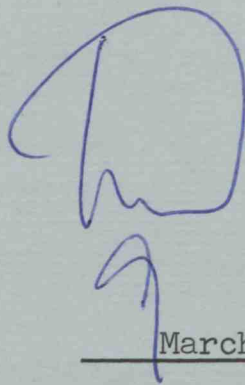
On the IBA side, I have so far acknowledged the strength of their claim without committing myself to meeting it, but I think that the time is now right to go further. The IBA wish to complement their existing Independent Local Radio (ILR) with a service of Independent National Radio (INR) which would also be financed by advertising. It would be public service broadcasting, with the usual elements of information, education and entertainment. Speech-based programmes would be intermixed with a range of music. The IBA envisage the service as being provided by a body under contract to them, with a franchise open to public competition in which a consortium of ILR companies could compete. They are confident that the advent of INR would lead to a substantial increase in the advertising on radio generally and not prejudice the financial viability of ILR.

The franchising arrangements will need further detailed consideration, but that need not prevent us from taking a decision in principle now. I believe a decision in favour of INR is justified because:

- a. national network radio is the sole area in our public service broadcasting where the BBC still enjoys a monopoly;
- b. the IBA are the appropriate agency to provide the competition; and
- c. there is no other contender bidding for the use of a national network, or indeed capable of operating one.

Legislation (albeit quite brief) would be required to amend the Broadcasting Act 1981 to enable the IBA to provide a national radio service. This is not urgent, but would have to be on the Statute book by 1986: it might be possible to combine it with the legislation necessary to enable the IBA to undertake satellite broadcasting.

Subject therefore to your views and those of colleagues, I should like to answer an arranged PQ before the House rises for the Easter Recess on the lines of the draft attached to this minute. I am sending copies to Cabinet colleagues and to Sir Robert Armstrong.



March 1983

DRAFT ARRANGED PQ

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if he will state the United Kingdom's objectives for the VHF Band II Planning Conference in 1984.

DRAFT REPLY

The United Kingdom's proposals have to be submitted to the ITU by 1 February 1984. A good deal of planning remains to be done and our neighbours will have to be consulted, but at this stage I believe that the UK's proposals can be drawn up in a way that will achieve the following objectives: the creation of two new national VHF networks; the further development of BBC and Independent Local Radio; and the maintenance of the existing VHF networks and improvements to their coverage.

Depending on the outcome of the Conference, frequencies for both new national networks should become available at the beginning of 1990, while frequencies for other purposes should become available by 1996. The IBA have proposed that one of the new national networks should be used to provide an Independent National Radio service. The Government finds this proposal attractive. Legislation would however be required to enable the IBA to provide such a service. I propose to allocate the other new network to the BBC so that there can be separate VHF networks for Radios 1 and 2.

Broadcasting
Apr 87, Radio
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