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From the Chairman

26 October 1987

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

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Dear Brian

There was one major issue I omitted from my note to the Prime Minister - the future structure of broadcasting. I felt it would have been inappropriate to write to her directly about the possible abolition of the IBA. One cannot, however, discuss structure without looking very hard at the IBA - hence the enclosed.

Yours
LC

The Structure of Broadcasting

Sensible broadcasters recognise that television is so powerful a medium that society will insist on some form of supervision. The question is: supervision by whom? There would appear to be only two alternatives: supervision direct by Parliament, or by a body created by Parliament, ultimately answerable to it, but with statutory safeguards against political interference in programmes. Historically, we in this country have chosen the second course, and will presumably wish to maintain this form of supervision in to the new era, but with so many more channels becoming available, will the present structure of BBC Governors, IBA and Cable Authority be the most suitable?

The BBC and ITV are, of course, structured completely differently. The BBC is a unitary body, its Governors the equivalent to non-executive directors of a company. (The division between Board of Governors and Board of Management has been nonsensical: there should be a single Board of six executive directors, including the Director General and six non-executives appointed by the Government, with a chairman carrying a casting vote). But even under the present system, when the Chairman and the Director General of the BBC go to see the Home Secretary, they carry with them direct managerial authority.

Not at all so the Chairman and the Director General of the IBA. On the contrary, the ITV companies are nearly all public companies, answerable ultimately to their shareholders. If the IBA tells the Home Secretary that ITV will adopt a certain policy - say, about independent producers - they do so usually after little or no consultation with the ITV companies, with no responsibility for carrying out that policy, or for the implications of that policy on the welfare of the shareholders. So far as ITV shareholders are concerned, the IBA represents a case of power without responsibility.

It is entirely right that television channels originating in this country should be supervised in the interests of safeguarding minimum standards with regard to violence, explicit sex, etc., and also fairness and political impartiality. It is also necessary that there should be statutory machinery for regulating access at least to the limited terrestrial frequencies.

But these objectives do not require the degree of day-to-day intervention which has come to be practised by the IBA. The Government should consider subsuming the IBA, the Cable Authority, the proposed Broadcasting Standards Commission, and the Programme Complaints Commission into a single body which would:

1. Regulate access to TV and radio channels - for instance, the granting of ITV franchises, and national radio frequencies.

2. Adjudicate over complaints about alleged bad taste and unfairness.

3. Monitor technical and programme developments, so that the Government can be kept up-to-date when considering policy changes - ie over the future of Channel 4, the prospect of further terrestrial channels, and the timetable of satellite and cable development. (The Home Secretary spoke of having to take a snapshot of a moving scene: the solution is to take a moving picture).

There are prototypes of such a body in the US and, particularly, Canada. The proposed Commission should obviously have a powerful lay element, including the chairman, but it should also contain an element of broadcasting professionals, drawn widely from both the programme and technical sides, a small scale replica of the PM's seminar.