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BROADCASTING IN THE '90s'

Since the publication of the White Paper on broadcasting there has been a good deal of public discussion, not least on the future for educational broadcasting. I thought that it would be helpful if I let you have my views. It is useful to distinguish between schools programmes, children's programmes and those of a broader educational nature.

We know from inspections carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate, and from the Surveys of Listening and Viewing, that both on BBC and independent television schools broadcasting is widely used and widely appreciated. A rich variety of programmes serves to enhance the work of the less able teacher, to explain difficult concepts or illustrate experiments, or to stimulate children's work through drawing the wider world into the classroom. Whilst there is something of a balance in favour of the BBC, a substantial majority of all schools, primary and secondary, make considerable use of independent TV schools broadcasting. I attach great importance to maintaining and even enhancing this level of provision. It is particularly important in the context of the new National Curriculum which we are to start introducing this Autumn, more particularly because of the shortage of teachers in Maths, Science and Design and Technology. It is right therefore that the ITC should have a duty to plan for adequate provision of such programmes by the independent television sector by requiring them to produce an adequate range of good quality programmes.

I also attach great importance to children's TV. This is transmitted in the morning and afternoon in time slots which are agreed and protected by tradition. The ITV companies and the BBC spend considerable resources on these programmes and the revenue does not cover the cost. Since deregulation, American TV companies have initially stopped showing children's TV and replaced them with a diet of rather poor cartoons and light entertainment for adults. Do we really want our children at 4pm watching quiz shows and soap operas?

In this country, children's TV whilst not specifically educational, does provide a firm foundation for schooling. They stimulate children and encourage them to do constructive things. They introduce them to drama and music. And they stimulate the child's imagination and sense of adventure. The programmes are viewed extensively by children and we should try to ensure that both the quality and quantity are fully maintained. If this is to be achieved we shall, I believe, need to provide mechanisms similar to those for schools broadcasting.

Quite apart from schools and children's television, we should I think do whatever we can to maintain broader educational programming on Independent Television. I have in mind programmes which discuss such issues as health or the environment, or which generally seek to broaden people's horizons. The requirement on Channel 4 to devote a suitable proportion of its air time to educational broadcasting will go some of the way to achieving this. But again these sorts of programmes will attract little advertising so that raises the question of funding. Funding options 1 and 3 do not provide for this and I hope therefore that we shall opt for the second of the funding options for this Channel.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Prime Minister, members of MISC 128, Tom King, Malcolm Rifkind and Peter Walker, and to Sir Robin Butler.

