



10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

1 October 1990

Dear John,

The way in which impartiality and balance are to be achieved in news and current affairs programmes is the subject of fierce debate at present and efforts are being made to create a statutory framework and to impose it on the BBC. The BBC is naturally resisting these pressures, arguing that the Charter already imposes such a duty and the Governors provide the mechanism for enforcing it.

Having heard the Opinion programme at 6.30 on Sunday evening, I do not think the BBC has really helped its case. This was a personal statement programme by Vivien Westwood about current policy on museums and galleries, and in particular on the use of entrance charges. It was a dreary, thirty minute, whinge telling a story of unrelieved underfunding and philistinism. Every conceivable criticism of the Government position was deployed and every critic given a platform.

It raises, however, an important question of how impartiality and balance are to be maintained. It was, I believe, one of a series of personal statement programmes. It can be argued that if, over the series, there is a range of presenters, some supporting and some criticising the Government, then the BBC's duty is fulfilled. But is this really enough? On the particular issue of museums and galleries, the listener is still left with an extremely biased presentation which will not be balanced by inviting someone from the Institute of Economic Affairs the following week to argue for education vouchers.

How are the many points which could be adduced against Vivien Westwood to be aired?

- (i) No mention was made of the belief of many of those in museums who have imposed charges that visitors are better treated and the staff more responsive. The latter no longer look upon visitors as a problem to be kept away from the exhibits, but as people with legitimate rights to information and assistance;
- (ii) There is a creditable record to be set out on the construction of new galleries, e.g. the Clore Gallery at the Tate, the Tate of the North, the move of the Courtauld Gallery to Somerset House and the National Gallery extension;

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- (iii) The case of the great experts at the V&A went unchallenged (these, after all, were the people who connived in closing the V&A on Fridays). No mention was made of their disregard for the general public, as opposed to fellow cognoscente, or their refusal to accept any corporate responsibility for the development of the museum;
- (iv) The experience of English Heritage, the National Trust and Museums Abroad is that entry charges are quite compatible with meeting growing interest in the heritage.

All of these points have gone by default and no mechanism seems to exist for allowing them to be made and for your listeners to draw their own conclusions on the balance of evidence and argument.

Although I have a professional interest in the impartiality issue, the above should be regarded as a personal observation from a member of the listening public rather than a formal representation from Government.

*Yours sincerely,
Andrew*

Andrew Turnbull

John Birt, Esq.

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