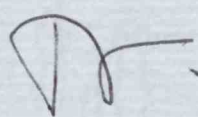


PRIME MINISTER

BBC BOARD OF GOVERNORS

The BBC Board of Governors, as I mentioned to you, held to their previous line on the withdrawal of the "Real Lives" programme. At the same time they issued a three-page statement, a copy of which is attached. The statement is extremely critical of the programme and makes it clear that the proper procedure for programmes of this nature was not followed. A delegation from the BBC comprising Stuart Young, William Rees-Mogg, Alasdair Milne and Alan Protheroe are going to see the Home Secretary tomorrow. The tone of the statement suggests that Milne may be disowning the programme makers. If this is really so it is all to the good.



TIMOTHY FLESHER

6 August 1985

LO3AJW

A STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BBC

The Board of Governors met today and further discussed the serious issues raised since last week in the case of "Real Lives: At The Edge of the Union". The Board believes that the reasons for their decision to stop the transmission of this film have been, to a great extent, misinterpreted and misunderstood. I am therefore issuing this account of what has passed. I hope it will lead to a clarifying of the Board's position as a firm defender of the BBC's independence from Government and all other interests.

The constitutional position is that the Board of Governors are the BBC and are therefore responsible for the editorial policy of the Corporation. They devolve the day-to-day management of the Corporation to a Director-General, whom they appoint, who is the editor-in-chief, and through him a Board of Management and other senior members of staff. Governors are appointed by the Queen in Privy Council on the recommendation of the Government of the day.

The Board of Governors have the right to view programmes before transmission, but, by custom, do so only in most exceptional circumstances. There is a very well tried and tested set of standing instructions for coverage of matters affecting Northern Ireland. Proposals to interview members of terrorist organisations and those who are, or may be, associated with such organisations can only be executed after complying with the regulations set out on page 52 of the News and Current Affairs Index. Such proposals must be made first to the relevant Head of Department "who will refer to Assistant Director-General and notify the Network Controller and Controller Northern Ireland. Interviews with individuals who are deemed by ADG to be closely associated with a terrorist organisation may not be sought or transmitted - two separate stages - without the prior permission of DG."

REAL LIVES : AT THE EDGE OF THE UNION

Contrary to what has been written in the press and spoken on the air, there has been a failure to observe the detailed guidelines at the highest level. The Assistant Director-General had the programme casually referred to him on one occasion; permission was not sought from him for transmission. The Director-General had no knowledge whatsoever of the programme. He first heard of it when he was on his holiday, after the subject had been raised by the press. The Board of Governors at no stage were informed of the existence of the programme.

After the programme had been shown to the press and raised in the headlines of the front page of the Sunday Times on 28th July, the Board of Management and the Board of Governors became deeply concerned about this matter.

On Monday, 29th July, the Board of Management collectively viewed the programme. In the absence of the Director-General on leave, the meeting was taken by the Deputy Director-General. He reported to the Chairman that the view of the Board of Management was that the programme required emendation, together with a suitable foreword describing its purpose. At the end of its transmission a programme should be shown discussing the issue of television and terrorism. With these three matters being dealt with, Board of Management wished the programme to be transmitted.

On the same day the Home Secretary conveyed a formal message to the Corporation, requesting the Board to stop the programme, releasing it simultaneously to the press. This was subsequently followed by his letter. He also indicated, to the Secretary, via Wilfred Hyde, Deputy Under Secretary of State at the Home Office, that if the Corporation were to show the programme he would like to see it before transmission. The Chairman telephoned the Home Secretary, requesting clarification and asking for the formal letter to be submitted as soon as possible, as such grave issues had been raised that a special meeting of the Board of Governors was being convened. The Home Secretary concurred, although the letter was not received until 7.10 p.m. that evening. The Board meeting took place the next day, Tuesday 30th July.

At the Board meeting the Deputy Director-General, Mr. Checkland, together with Mr. Protheroe (ADG) and Mr. Wenham (D.P.Tel.) explained the Management's position which was, as previously stated in this statement; subject to emendation, with a positive preface and the concluding debate, Management wished the programme to be transmitted. The Governors discussed for a considerable time the propriety of taking the exceptional stance of viewing the programme before transmission. This was ultimately agreed upon, as an extraordinary step, only because the Governors felt that it was important to see a programme when the Home Secretary was writing in unprecedented terms which questioned the security of the State, law and order, and the giving of succour to terrorists.

Speaking for myself, and for most members of the Board, the view before seeing the programme was that it would enable the Governors to support Management in its desire for transmission to take place. The Board is not competent to pronounce on matters of national security but believed that only on the basis of viewing the programme could it defend it if necessary and refer any issue of security back to the Home Secretary. The decision to view was agreed unanimously.

In the event, the Governors viewed the programme and were unanimous in expressing their concern that the programme could not be transmitted without emendation. This, of course, was also the Board of Management's view. However, there were differing views, extending from "no transmission at any price" down to one member of the Board who was prepared for transmission subject to the proposed amendments taking place. All Governors were concerned about lack of balance in the programme. The majority were equally concerned, in the present climate of high feeling, about its soft treatment of the extremist case. In the event, after many hours of discussion, the Board exercised its constitutional right in taking the editorial decision not to transmit the programme on a vote of 10 : 1.

Since that major discussion the Board's position has been misrepresented. The major issue is one of censorship. The Board objects most strongly to certain of the contents of the Home Secretary's letter of 29th July. It is most disturbed that the decision of the previous week has been seen as a yielding to Government pressure. The Chairman, together with the Director-General and responsible Management, are seeking a meeting with the Home Secretary, the intention being, when the atmosphere is calm and neutral, to debate these serious matters relating to the total unacceptability of censorship and the Board's commitment to the full independence of the Corporation.

The decision not to transmit the programme at the present time was because the Board considered the programme to be flawed in its present state and, even if amended, unsuitable for viewing in the prevailing atmosphere. The Board, therefore, had no alternative but to exercise its constitutional right and responsibility.

(Stuart Young)

6th August 1985