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SUBJECT *cc* MASTER



*file Lho  
cc BG*

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*From the Principal Private Secretary*

17 November 1989

BBC LICENCE FEE EVASION

At their bilateral meeting, the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary discussed the enforcement of the TV licence. The Home Secretary spoke along the lines of your letter of 14 November to Dominic Morris. He was reluctant to take steps in the Broadcasting Bill to remove criminal sanctions. First, this would introduce issues relating to the BBC into a Bill which was otherwise confined to independent television. From a Parliamentary point of view it was much better to narrow the front of opposition. Secondly, he was worried that if there were a loss of revenue, there would be pressure on the Government to increase the licence fee. He suggested retaining the criminal sanctions but making arrangements to ensure that they came into play only as a last resort.

The Prime Minister said she remained firmly opposed to criminal sanctions. Whatever the formal position, in practice the TV licence was a charge by the BBC to finance its output which was levied on all TV users whether or not they watched BBC programmes. The recovery of such a charge should be treated as a debt, in the same way as any private sector company would recover debts, and this should be a matter for the civil courts.

The Home Secretary repeated the arguments for not tackling this issue in the Broadcasting Bill and he suggested that it might be deferred to the Criminal Justice Bill expected in the next session, or to the review of the Charter in 1994.

It was agreed that there would be no clause on this in the Broadcasting Bill though the long title should be drafted in such a way as to allow amendments to be made should pressure arise from backbenchers. The matter would be looked at again in the context of the Criminal Justice Bill.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to the members of MISC 128, to Paul Stockton (Lord Chancellor's Office) and to Trevor Woolley (Cabinet Office).

ANDREW TURNBULL

Colin Walters, Esq.,  
Home Office.

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