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*From the Principal Private Secretary*

28 June 1990

**BROADCASTING BILL: IMPARTIALITY**

The Prime Minister held a meeting this morning to discuss the approach the Government should take to the amendments tabled at the committee stage of the Broadcasting Bill in the House of Lords which were designed to enforce greater impartiality. The Home Secretary, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Mr. Whittingdale were present.

The Prime Minister said she regarded the lack of impartiality in the output of the BBC and the independent television companies as a serious matter. In particular, she was concerned by the failure of the BBC to enforce impartiality on its own staff. Instances of selective and biased reporting were frequent and continuing. The amendments tabled by Lord Wyatt and others offered an opportunity to improve matters, and she hoped it would be possible for the Government to find ways of supporting these amendments.

The Home Secretary said he was willing to suggest amendments to Clause 6 similar to those sought by Lord Wyatt which would specify in the Bill some of the features which should be included in the code of guidance which the ITC would be required to produce. This could cover such matters as the time-scale within which balancing programmes should be broadcast, and the prominence to be given to them. He was also willing to bring so-called personal view programmes within the scope of the impartiality regime. But he pointed out that Clause 6 was confined to the ITC's role as a regulator. Any changes would have no effect on the BBC whose Charter had assigned the regulatory role to the Governors. To introduce amendments to the Bill that changed the role of the Governors would alter the character of the Bill in a major way. It would re-introduce an element of fierce controversy and was not a course he would advise.

Mr. Baker endorsed the Prime Minister's view on the seriousness of the problem. He thought it would be difficult to defend imposing strict impartiality requirements on ITV companies, while leaving the BBC's position untouched, particularly as much of the slanted output originated from the

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BBC. The Prime Minister questioned why it was not possible to make changes apply to the BBC. She pointed out that the BSC was being made statutory under the Bill, and that it applied to the BBC as well as independent television companies.

The Home Secretary replied that the BSC's remit was confined to the portrayal of sex and violence and to questions of taste and decency. It would be empowered to draw up a code giving guidance on these matters, but it would have no sanctions other than influence on public opinion through the publication of its findings. It was not, therefore, a regulatory body in the true sense, and its remit did not therefore conflict with the regulatory role assigned to the Governors. To extend its remit to matters of impartiality would be tantamount to amendment of the BBC Charter. In any case, Lord Rees-Mogg did not wish the BSC to take on this role. (It was agreed that it would not be appropriate for the BCC to deal with questions of impartiality as its function was to handle complaints and grievances of individuals.)

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that the changes the Home Secretary had suggested for Clause 6 of the Bill which would specify certain required features of the ITC's code would be a significant advance, but while they remained confined to the ITC, much of the problem would remain untackled. She therefore asked the Home Secretary to examine urgently how these amendments could be made to cover the BBC, either by making the provisions of the revised Clause 6 directly applicable to it or by extending the role of the BSC. The latter could either be given a regulatory role or it could hear complaints and produce findings as it will do on questions of sex, violence and decency. It would be helpful if he could talk to Lord Wyatt and Lord Rees-Mogg. The Prime Minister would welcome further advice before the relevant clauses are reached in the House of Lords.

I should be grateful if this letter could be copied only to those with a strict need to know of its contents.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Robert Canniff (Office of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster).

*Yours sincerely  
Andrew Turnbull*

(ANDREW TURNBULL)

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Home Office.