

~~GENCENSORED~~

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE REFORM OF THE OBSCENE PUBLICATIONS ACTS

NCROPA

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The N.C.R.O.P.A. is affiliated to the National Council for Civil Liberties

NO/DAW/DP

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Censorship and Public Service Broadcasting

We understand that, at a Downing Street Seminar on Monday next, 21st September, H.M. Government is to discuss sex and violence in public service broadcasting, and the proposed extension of the provisions of the 1959 and 1964 Obscene Publications Acts to cover radio and television programmes. The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts (NCROPA) regards such action as inappropriate, unjustified and quite unnecessary, and is wholly opposed to it.

Public Service Broadcasting is already more than adequately controlled and restricted by the various broadcasting Acts. The broadcasting authorities' own 'voluntary' guidelines on the inclusion of sex and/or violence in their transmissions are already a rigid safeguard. Indeed, the NCROPA regards them already as excessively harsh. To inflict further censorship restrictions on the programme makers and subject them additionally to the inhibiting confines of the Obscene Publications Acts, the lamentable results of which, in other media, are all too familiar to anyone who cherishes freedom of choice and individual liberty, would be an act, not only of recklessness, but of crass stupidity. It would also be an act of gross hypocrisy for the present Government so to legislate, formed, as it is, by members of a political party which ever proclaims 'the freedom of the individual' as the cornerstone of its whole philosophy.

Our present repressive, puritanical and out-moded Obscene Publications Acts are a disgrace to a supposedly free country. Far from extending their areas of influence, we believe the Government should act to diminish their provisions to the absolute minimum. This would effectively mean their complete repeal except for basic, very limited measures for the 'protection' of children (although this does not imply that we accept that children are necessarily 'at risk', as the term 'protection' might suggest), and for the 'protection' of those adults who do not wish to be forcibly affronted by material that they would deem offensive. Such proposals would be more or less in line with the recommendations of the 1979 Home Office Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship (the Williams Committee)

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which were unanimous, but which, shamefully, have still not been acted upon.

In promoting such demands, we are not asking for that which is outrageous, or even unreasonable. Virtually all other countries of the so-called 'free' Western World have now dispensed with our kind of draconian censorship and operate a similarly 'free choice for adults' kind of legislation, or even free-er. The countries who operate the kind of legislation closest to our own are mostly those totalitarian régimes of Eastern Bloc states which British Governments superciliously purport to deplore. We may be free-er here in many respects, but censorship is not one of them.

It is vital to the arts and entertainment in general that they are allowed a free hand, if they are to expand, and flourish and progress. News, Current Affairs, Documentaries and other factual programmes must also be free from state interference so that they can inform and enlighten honestly, impartially and fully. It will be intolerable for TV and Radio producers and directors constantly to have to subject their programmes to the absurd "deprave and corrupt" test of the 1959 Act - absurd because 'depravity' and 'corruption' are both highly subjective terms and legally unquantifiable. The even more absurd "grossly offensive to a reasonable person" test, as promulgated in Gerald Howarth's (or was it the Home Office's?) recent and unlamented private member's Bill, will certainly not do either, since practically everything shown on television is "grossly offensive" to someone, somewhere, and every someone, somewhere, thinks of him or herself as a "reasonable person". The mind-boggling consequences of carrying so lunatic a definition to its logical conclusion would mean that no programme would theoretically be transmissible.

Regarding violence, which currently seems to be the major concern of the establishment, and rightly so, it is essential to keep a proper perspective. Violence always has and, regrettably, always will be a part of society. Violent crime may have increased in recent years. On the other hand methods of detection, greater inclination to report crime, or even simply population increases, may all have something to do with this. There is also a widely-held view that crime is certainly no more rife now than it ever was, and possibly considerably less so. Indeed, that was the theme of an excellent television documentary programme in 1983 written and presented by Laurie Taylor, Professor of Sociology at York University, for BBC2.

Broadcasting, both television and radio, reflects society, warts and all, and that must be right. Violence-free television would not only be dishonest, it would be boring. There is a streak of aggression even in the meekest of us. Its depiction in televised drama often acts as a useful catharsis.

The impact of television on the viewer, either in programme or advertisement form is not, however, one of unqualified and unchallenged persuasiveness. The images transmitted on the screen certainly publicise, familiarise and inform the viewer, but that in no way ensures or compels approval or acceptance, or even any positive effect one way or the other of such images or ideas suggested by them. The notion that anything shown on television is automatically and uncontrollably desired or imitated may be the advertising industry's pipe-dream, but it is, in reality, a myth. A much more valid notion is surely that what is screened, particularly if it is disliked or unpleasant, will inspire aversion. That same criterion will also apply when violence is screened.

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The argument that children are at risk, even if adults are not, is also grossly over-stated. Children are perfectly capable of differentiating between fantasy and reality and are not nearly as vulnerable as many of our would-be censors would have us believe.

Sadly there will also always be society's misfits, 'oddballs' and inadequates and, again regrettably, they will always be a risk and at risk. However, no amount of legislation will ever guarantee society's protection against these anti-social unfortunates. There are many anti-social activities in our lives, but in its wisdom, and in the wider, over-riding interests of a free society, Parliament does respond to these with harshly authoritarian restrictive legislation. It does not ban the sale of solvents because a minority of children (about one every six days) kill themselves by sniffing glue. It does not ban alcohol because a minority of people kill themselves and others by excessive drinking (about 1000 people are killed on the roads every year by drunken driving). It does not ban motor vehicles because a minority of 5000-6000 lives are lost each year in road accidents. It does not ban smoking because a minority of approximately 100,000 people die each year as a direct result of the habit. And it should not ban TV and radio programmes because a minority of people become violent criminals, notwithstanding that any positive link between their harmful behaviour and what is seen on television has ever been proven, in spite of the many spurious and often ludicrous attempts at so-called scientific research to do so.

The recent panic rush by some television chiefs to applaud the 'virtues' of the present 1959 Act is spineless and deplorable. They really should, and we believe, really do, know better. They are, fortunately, in the minority. Their only sensible and realistic view, and it is a view held by the vast majority of their colleagues and subordinates, as well as the vast majority of the British radio and television audience, unless we are to end up with wall-to-wall "Blue Peter", "Gardener's World" and "Songs of Praise", must be that the Government's proposals on broadcasting censorship are ill-conceived, unnecessary and unwanted, and should be scrapped.

The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts concurs with that view and further contends that the vast majority of the British public would welcome a relaxation of censorship in the U.K. rather than its strengthening. Respectfully we crave your careful and rational consideration of our views and very much hope that you will be persuaded to accept and wish to act on our representations.

Yours sincerely,

David Webb,
Honorary Director,
National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts