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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

7 October 1980

Dear Mrs. Whitehouse,

Thank you for your letter of 30 September about the amendment to the Broadcasting Bill tabled by Lord Nugent and the Earl of Halsbury, which would provide that the Broadcasting Complaints Commission should deal with a wide ranging selection of matters concerning the content of broadcast programmes.

I can assure you that the Home Secretary and I are always concerned about programme standards in broadcasting. We are, of course, aware that there is some public concern about programme standards and that the application of the standards to particular broadcasts may be controversial. But the structure for broadcasting in this country puts a very clear responsibility on the broadcasting authorities, that is the BBC and the IBA, about programme standards. Section 4(1)(a) of the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act 1973 places a duty on the IBA to satisfy themselves that, so far as possible, the programmes broadcast by the authority include nothing which offends against good taste or decency or is likely to encourage or incite to crime or to lead to disorder or to be offensive to public feeling. The BBC accepts a similar obligation through a letter from the then Chairman of the Corporation which is noted in the prescribing memorandum made under the Corporation's Licence and Agreement.

The broadcasting authorities have an elaborate structure of advisory bodies who can be consulted about particular aspects of broadcasting. They carry out research into public attitudes and engage in public meetings. They review the standards applied to particular kinds of programme from time to time: since 1968, for instance, both broadcasting authorities have considered and approved guidelines regarding violence in television programmes. And I believe that they treat seriously the complaints they receive from the public.

/You

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You may recall that the Annan Committee considered the question of complaints very carefully in its report and came to the conclusion that it would be wrong for one and the same body to hear complaints from individuals and organisations who felt that they had been misrepresented or unfairly treated and complaints from the general public about the taste, content or standard of individual programmes and programmes in general. The Committee considered that complaints of the first kind raised quasi judicial issues which should be dealt with by persons skilled in the assessment of evidence and knowledgeable about broadcasting, such persons being constituted into a complaints body entirely independent of broadcasting authorities themselves. The Committee also felt that complaints about programme content were and must be a matter for the authorities themselves. In drawing up its proposals in the Bill, the Government has attached great weight to the views of the Annan Committee.

It would not be right to have the exercise of the IBA's statutory duty or of the BBC's obligation under its constitutional documents examined by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission. Under the system which has applied to broadcasting in the United Kingdom since the BBC was first set up, the responsibility for programme content rests, and must be seen to rest, with the broadcasting authorities themselves. The Home Secretary cannot, therefore, accept the amendment to which you have referred.

The Home Secretary intends, however, to draw to the attention of the Chairman of the BBC and IBA the further expression of concern in your letter.

Yours sincerely

Raymond White

Mrs Mary Whitehouse