



PRIME MINISTER

M. Waddington

Cer 10/11/86 P. Miller

Right of answer made to
Merlyn Rees

HES

TELEVISING PROCEEDINGS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Although the House last decided less than two years ago not to hold an experiment in the televising of its proceedings, interest in the subject has continued and has been particularly strong since the beginning of the new Parliament. Most recently, I have received a letter from Merlyn Rees, seeking a meeting on behalf of an all-party group on televising the House: it seems certain that interest in the subject will be sustained when the House returns. I believe that a further debate will be inevitable and that it would be helpful for us to consider now how to handle it.

The debate in November 1985 took place on a Private Member's motion, moved by Janet Fookes, that "this House approves in principle the holding of an experiment in the public broadcasting of its proceedings by televising: and believes that a Select Committee should be appointed to consider the implementation of such an experiment". This does not seem to me necessarily the most satisfactory way of dealing with the issue, since the House was asked to take a decision on the principle of holding an experiment on the basis of somewhat slender information about what would be entailed. In the absence of firsthand knowledge of what the broadcasters would propose, the debate focussed on hypothetical assumptions and repetitive assertions about the form of the experiment, none of which could be accepted as a generally agreed basis for discussion.

Accordingly, I propose that this time the debate should not be on the principle of televising the House, but simply on the issue of whether the House wishes to set up a Select Committee to advise on the form which an experiment in televising should take if the House later decided in favour of such an experiment.

I have discussed with David Waddington the probable result of a free vote in this Parliament on televising proceedings. I believe that there has been a small increase in support for televising on our side of the House, and that this together with the modest increase in the number of Opposition Members, who seem more likely to vote in favour of televising, means that it is likely that the vote would go in favour of televising.

If this is indeed the case there seem two particular advantages to the proposed new motion which would be put before the House. First, it would ensure that all the factors in such an experiment could be considered by the Select Committee, and the best information available could be taken into account in each Member's decision. Second, at the Select Committee stage there would still not be a commitment in principle to holding an experiment: this should mean that the broadcasting authorities, in their evidence to the Select Committee, are more likely to meet the wishes of the House about, for example, the financing and editorial control of an experiment.

This approach would, however, involve a more protracted process, and given the pressure which already exists for a debate, I believe there is merit in inviting the House to make a decision sooner rather than later. But clearly it would not be sensible to proceed along these lines unless there were general support for the form which the debate would take. If you are content with the proposal, I will see Merlyn Rees and let him know, on a personal basis, how we are minded to proceed. Whatever we decide, I think we are bound to have the debate either just before or immediately after Christmas.

I am copying this minute to David Waddington.



JW