

PRIME MINISTERTELEVISIONING COMMONS

This note may be helpful for our discussion tomorrow.

I regard it as only a matter of time before the House is televised given that:

- televising the Commons is a matter for the House itself;
- the House has already agreed to radio broadcasting; and
- the broadcasters are likely to be able to satisfy the House on the intensity of the lights and intrusion.

If these assumptions are correct, the Lord Privy Seal's approach - ie to have a Select Committee advise on the acceptable form of an experiment - seems to be eminently sensible.

But I think it only realistic to recognise that if the Commons agrees to an experiment, television will be there to stay. The television authorities will take care not to offend during the experiment; what they do afterwards is another matter. That means that the House needs to be clear what it will and won't allow by way of televising its proceedings.

It might therefore be useful if I rehearsed some considerations first from a professional and then from a Governmental point of view.

Professional

First, equity. I have the greatest difficulty in arguing against televising the House when newspapers have been reporting Parliament for over a century and when radio regularly and systematically broadcasts extracts and makes room in its schedules for the great or controversial occasions.

Second, I find it difficult to argue against televising the House when, without the corrective of film, press and radio in their different ways have systematically glamourised, distorted and hyped to a ridiculous degree debates, arguments and so-called rows in the Commons.

Third, I think it will be difficult to argue successfully against much tighter control over televising the proceedings of the House than over press and radio reporting when press and radio are free to report and summarise all of what goes on in the chamber in public session. The twin track concept of fixed camera shots of the two sides of the House and of shots fixed solely on the Minister or MP who is speaking seems scarcely to be equitable as between the different branches of the media.

*At least  
red-  
acted  
in  
the  
House*

Fourth, I do not regard a single TV channel broadcasting the Commons uninterrupted as an alternative when press and radio are permitted to treat the Commons in news terms and select and summarise.

Notwithstanding all these factors, it may be argued that television is so different from the other media that it must be treated differently by the Commons. It is true television is a very powerful medium. It is also true that the presence of television cameras changes the nature of any event. But given the distorting mirrors of press and radio, would television change the Commons so much for the worse? I think the honest answer is that no one can be sure, though whatever mystique remains will certainly go.

On the one hand it will encourage the exhibitionists and those exhibitionists could damage the reputation from the House. It may well bring out the worst in others. On the other hand, the television camera, honestly and objectively directed, could put the exhibitionist and the badly behaved in a proper context.

There is undoubtedly an argument that something so unique as Parliament should seek to preserve what is left of its mystique, but it is difficult to sustain that argument in the face of the televising of the Lords and of the State Opening of Parliament itself.

Journalists would go so far as to say that nothing damages the Commons more than its unwillingness to be seen, warts and all, by those who elected it. Indeed its refusal to admit the cameras could be as self-damaging as was the much earlier refusal to admit the press. Parliament ultimately belongs to the people and the people should be allowed to see their institution at work.

#### Governmentally

This professional media viewpoint should focus the attention of Government and Commons on essentials. And for Government (and also a potential Opposition) the following are the essentials:

- Taking the rough with the smooth, will television work to the advantage of Parliament?
- Is it such a powerful medium that it will build in inherent advantages for Government or Opposition?
- What controls are required to ensure that the camera is directed honestly and objectively?
- What, if any, restrictions should be placed on the use of cameras in the House and its precincts?
- What, if any, restrictions should be placed on the use of film of the proceedings of the House?
- What, if any, machinery should there be to review the experimental televising of the House and any subsequent agreement for "permanent" television.

Taking each point in turn:

- i. Will television work to the advantage of Parliament? This is a matter of judgement. The very question puts a weapon into the hands of those who seek an experimental period. But would an experiment provide a reliable indication of the likely long term effect? To some extent this will depend on the ground rules. But it will also depend on the nature of MPs.
- ii. Will television work to the advantage of Government or Opposition? Again this is a matter of judgement. In my view it should work to the advantage of Government - and especially a Government under your leadership - because this will depend in the end on the substance of the Government. Television is a cruelly searching instrument which exposes to the British people at least the shallow and the empty. It seems unlikely to serve Mr Kinnock, however entertaining he may be as a speaker. It would, however, be a powerful aid to an Opposition leader with real bottom, provided of course he was not lumbered with lunatic Backbenchers.
- iii. What controls are required to ensure that the camera is directed honestly and objectively? This is the crucial and most difficult question. I simply don't believe that it is possible with the kind of sophisticated viewing public we have in Britain to restrain the television cameras to fixed shots of the House and the particular Minister or Member speaking. That could be - and no doubt would be - regarded as censorship. I see no practical alternative, if the

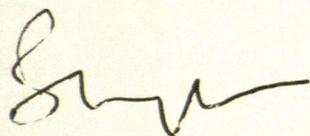
cameras are admitted, to relying on the judgement of the broadcasting authorities, with their performance in the use and re-use of film possibly subject to review by a Select Committee.

- iv. What if any restrictions should be placed on the use of cameras in the House or in the precincts? Obviously fixed camera points and the scope for filming would need to be agreed, and I have dealt with this issue above. You should, however, be under no illusions that the television companies will never be satisfied. Moreover, unless there is a clear ruling the cameras will immediately feel free to roam within the precincts of the House (as they do in the USA) and to film Select Committees and other meetings. In short, televising the Commons will, unless the position is otherwise made clear, be taken as open sesame to the cameras in all but the inner sanctum - eg the Members' Lobby.
- v. What, if any, restrictions should be placed on the use of film? See iii. above.
- vi. What, if any, machinery should there be to review the experimental televising of the House and possibly subsequent agreement for "permanent" television? The Government would have to weigh very carefully its attitude towards any continuing machinery for reviewing the operation of television. I am personally very fearful of getting into a position where the Government - as distinct from the House - is seen to be "censoring" or "muzzling" the media.

#### Summary

You may think all this is very "wet" of me since I hold the view that the media, and especially television, should not be allowed to rule the Government. I do, however, feel that the separate treatment of television, as a branch of the media, is very difficult to defend, especially when the proceedings of the Commons are broadcast on radio and the Lords and the State Opening of Parliament in both.

More narrowly, I don't think you can lose.



BERNARD INGHAM  
22 October 1987