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BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

Minutes of a special meeting of Board of Management  
held on Wednesday, 7th August at 5.00 p.m.  
in the Board Room, Broadcasting House.

Present: D.G. (in the chair)  
M.D.R.  
M.D.Tel.  
M.D.X.B.  
A.D.G.  
D.P.A.  
D.Pers.  
D.P.Tel.  
D.F.

In Attendance: The Secretary  
The Deputy Secretary

435. MEETING WITH THE HOME SECRETARY

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D.G. said he had just returned from a meeting with the Home Secretary. The BBC delegation had consisted of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, D.G., A.D.G. and The Secretary. Mr. Brittan had been accompanied by Giles Shaw, Minister of State with responsibility for Broadcasting, Nicholas Scott, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Sir Brian Cubbon, Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office and Wilfred Hyde, Deputy Under-Secretary of State

D.G. said the meeting had been robust; there had been much straight talking. The Chairman had begun by saying the BBC had sought the meeting to demonstrate its strong feelings about the tenor of Mr. Brittan's letter of 29th July to the Chairman and, in particular, concern about its final 2 paragraphs. This was the first occasion on which a Minister had publicly approached the BBC to request that a programme should not be broadcast. Mr. Brittan had replied he was astonished at the way his letter had been received. Paragraph 2 had emphasised the independence of the BBC. Ministers had a right to express views and the BBC should take note of their concerns. From material which appeared in the Radio Times and elsewhere it was clear the programme featured a murderer speaking about murder. That, to the Home Secretary was unacceptable. He drew a

distinction between that and the general question of interviewing terrorists which, since they could be involved in the political process, was accepted in principle. The Home Secretary had quoted paragraph 17.12 of the Annan Report concerning the comfort afforded to terrorists by publicity.

D.G. said Mr. Brittan had pressed hard for a joint statement, which the BBC had resisted. There had, however, been agreement that both sides would stress there was no question of censorship by Ministers. Mr. Brittan sought an acceptance of his right to comment on programmes and to have such comments taken seriously. The BBC side had conceded that Ministers would inevitably express opinions but had said these would be noted,- nothing more.

The Home Secretary had been seeking to shift the constitutional position towards an acceptance of his right to influence BBC decisions. The BBC had stood firm against that. Mr. Brittan had expressed no regret about the final paragraphs of his letter of 29th.

Replying to questions from colleagues, D.G. said he did not think the Home Secretary had realised he was the first such Minister to ask publicly for a programme to be cancelled. D.G. said that, with reference to the Annan Report, he had pointed to the complications which had arisen for the broadcasters since Provisional Sinn Fein's participation in politics had been legalised. The Home Secretary had continued to distinguish between interviewing terrorists and allowing them to advocate murder. He had not withdrawn the sentence from his letter saying he would have requested a ban on any such programme, however accurately the protagonists were portrayed. A.D.G. said Mr. Brittan had resisted the suggestion that the Government should offer the media guidelines on the coverage of terrorism. A.D.G. had pointed out that the Government's intervention had already given Noraid publicity and an unprecedented opportunity to recruit support. A.D.G. said Mr. Brittan had claimed not to be exercising any ministerial power, he had reiterated his personal right to express a view. The Secretary noted that Mr. Brittan had repeated the point on a number of occasions, strengthening it each time and emphasising that his views "should be considered". A.D.G. agreed; the Home Secretary had undoubtedly been trying to move towards some prescriptive right. D.G. added that Mr. Brittan had

remained cool until A.D.G. had said it was the role of Government not to censor but, - and only if they felt it necessary, - to censure. D.G. noted the officials present at the meeting had seemed to think the Home Secretary was going too far during the exchange. A.D.G. said it was in the political interests of the Government to try and score points at the expense of the BBC. The Home Secretary would clearly continue to try and do so.

Concluding his report on the meeting with the Home Secretary, D.G. said the Chairman had made it clear he wished management to issue the BBC's response and to carry forward the business of informing the public of the BBC's position.

436. STATEMENTS BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

Board of Management then considered the drafting of two statements from D.G., one responding to the Home Secretary's comments at a press conference held while Board of Management was in session and one for staff, designed to re-establish morale and reassure them as to the editorial position. Both would be released to the press. D.P.Tel. proposed a brief statement for staff and this was largely accepted, together with additions from D.P.A. and detailed amendments from other colleagues. (Copies of both statements are appended to the minutes.)

It was agreed that the response to the Home Office would be released that night and that D.G. would undertake a full range of interviews concentrating on that issue but pointing ahead to the fact that he was circulating a further statement to staff in the morning. He would address staff direct, via the ring-main, at 1.30 p.m. the following day. He would then speak personally to staff in Bush House.

In arriving at a final draft, members of Board of Management emphasised the importance of reassuring staff about the editorial chain of command. M.D.R. said there was a vacuum as far as staff were concerned which must be filled. Board of Management must support the editor-in-chief clearly and unanimously. Reassurance was urgently needed by all staff, not simply by the journalists. Nor was the editorial issue restricted to Northern Ireland. M.D.Tel. said the urgent need was to give all staff a sense of

security. However, he warned against painting the Board into a corner while doing so. He also thought it important that D.G.'s statement should tie in with the beliefs expressed by Mr. Roberts.

M.D.Tel. said the first question staff would ask would be when the programme would be shown. D.G. said the Board had been clear they did not wish transmission to go ahead in the autumn. Beyond that, the Board had left the matter to D.G.'s judgement.

D.P.A. reported on pressure in Scotland for a meeting of the Broadcasting Council. He said some members of the GAC were also urging a meeting. Reverting to editorial questions, he asked whether there was a need to look again at the News and Current Affairs guidelines. D.G. said he had made it clear that as far as Northern Ireland was concerned the guidelines had been followed. He would have been happier if the proper reference to D.G. had occurred, but that had not altered the fundamental editorial judgement about the programme. D.F. believed D.G. should restate his belief that if normal reference had taken place and the public row been avoided, then management would have transmitted the programme. D.P.A. said there was a belief in some quarters that management had been weak in presenting its case at the two emergency Board meetings. It must do so now. D.P.Tel. said Management must re-establish its authority in relation to the programme and not by risking being wrong footed in a constitutional confrontation with the Board. M.D.Tel. said he would like to see a convincing statement that the Board would not preview another programme and that normal procedures would be re-established.

STATEMENT BY ALASDAIR MILNE, DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE BBC

2015 - WEDNESDAY, 7th AUGUST, 1985

The Director-General said he welcomed the Home Secretary's categorical assurance that he will not now, or in the future, censor the BBC. The Director-General also pointed out that, while he accepts the right of any citizen to comment on programmes, such comment on programmes which have not been transmitted, is likely to be misinterpreted. When such comment is further accompanied by a direct request to remove the programme - no matter what its actual content and context, in this case by a Minister of the Crown, it will be assumed that Government is seeking to dictate programme policy. The BBC will firmly resist such pressure.

PJ 7.8.85

Further enquiries to Michael Bunce/Peter Rosier, BBC Press Office.

STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

Last Tuesday the Chairman of the BBC Board of Governors issued a full statement on the position concerning the Real Lives documentary - At the Edge of the Union. The facts as stated there are correct.

Other Governors have also made their views known - in formal interview, in off-the-record briefings, or in pavement remarks.

It is now time for the staff to hear my views and those of the BBC Board of Management.

As the Chairman said in his statement the day-to-day management of the Corporation is devolved to the Director-General, whom the Board appoints and who is Editor-in-Chief, and through him to the Board of Management.

The Board of Management regrets that the Governors could not accept the clear warnings that were given to them, at the meeting on 30th July, on the effect their decisions would have on the BBC's perceived independence at home and abroad and on the morale and confidence of staff in the domestic and external services.

My Board of Management and I now wish to make clear what we require of those who work for and sustain the BBC. In all programme matters we all seek the truth in a forthright and an evenhanded manner. That is the BBC tradition. It transcends and overrides the particular views of any individual member of staff. It transcends any external pressures. It transcends the attitudes of any Board of Management or of any Board of Governors.

In the matter of Northern Ireland, the BBC has not and will not provide unchallenged opportunities for the advocacy of terrorism. We will continue to follow the policy laid down by my two immediate predecessors - Sir Charles Curran and Sir Ian Trethowan - and by myself. That policy extends to the exploration and explanation of the views and motives of those who avow terrorist activity - and their associates. It includes, on occasion, the use of broadcast interviews. The Chairman and I reaffirmed to the Home Secretary that the policy remains unchanged.

As to the preparation of "Real Lives", I endorse the views of my colleagues on the Board of Management that the intention of the programme was proper and that those involved in the making of the programme behaved scrupulously in the discharge of their duty. There was, however, a failure to observe the guidelines at the highest level.

I share the view of my colleagues on Board of Management that additions can and should be made to the film before transmission - for the purpose of greater clarity and without impairing the integrity of the programme.

I am asking the departmental head, Will Wyatt and the producer, Paul Hamaan, to undertake that work and to show the expanded film to me.

I shall then be able to come to a decision concerning the transmission of the film and convey it to the Governors.

8.8.85