



FROM: A WOOD
DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION SERVICE
3 DECEMBER 1991

ISG file

- cc: PS/Paymaster General (B&L)-B
- PS/Minister of State (B&L)-B
- PS/PUS (B&L)-B
- PS/Mr Fell-B
- Mr Ledlie-B
- Mr Thomas (B&L)-B
- Mr Wilson-B
- Mr Alston-B
- Mr Bell-B
- Mr Leach-B
- Mr D J Hill-B
- Mr D A Cooke-B
- Mr Petch-B
- Mr Percival-B
- (without enclosures)



PS/Secretary of State (B&L)-B

MICHAEL GRADE - CHANNEL 4

4/12
Mr [Signature]
for file
2 Dec
4/12

Background

The Secretary of State is meeting Mr Grade over lunch on 5 December. The meeting was asked for by the Northern Ireland Office to voice our disquiet over two recent Channel 4 "documentaries" on Northern Ireland.

- (a) "The Committee" broadcast in the "Despatches" series on Tuesday 1 October. It alleged collusion between the Security Forces and Protestant paramilitaries in targetting and killing Republicans.
- (b) "Pack Up The Troubles" broadcast in the "Critical Eye" series on Thursday 24 October. Although trailed as a documentary, it argued from a pre-conceived stance for "Troops Out".

MR Maxwell

Mr [Signature] please
For [Signature] 9/12
Important
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For ISG
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2. Both programmes have been the subject of correspondence with Channel 4.

Channel 4 and the RUC

3. On "The Committee" the Chief Constable issued a lengthy statement (copy attached A) which said the programme was "long on accusations and inference but lacking in usable or credible evidence".

4. The RUC subsequently (7 October) sent representatives to the London Office of the production company, Box Productions, to ask them to provide details of their research. Some material was handed over - but was not of a kind to enable meaningful further enquiries to be made.

5. The RUC, acting through the Metropolitan Police, applied to a court in London under the PTA to have more material supplied to them. Sitting on 15 October, the court granted the RUC application but allowed a seven day stay to enable Box Productions to warn their sources and/or consider an appeal. More material was provided on 25 November. NOT FOR USE: Other material is still outstanding: the RUC, in consultation with the CPS, is considering what steps in law may yet be open to it to recover all the material they need for a full assessment of the programme's allegations.

Channel 4 and the NIO

6. To date I have sent two letters of complaint to Channel 4 about "Pack Up the Troubles" to the Commissioning Editor for Independent Productions and received two replies (Annex B).

7. After a less than satisfactory first reply, Channel 4 has now recognised and apologised that "one of the programme's main editorial issues was not made entirely clear. This is obviously not a state of affairs with which Channel 4 is satisfied and I apologise for the fact that it happened" (letter of 29 November).

8. I regard this as a satisfactory admission and outcome. Our main charge - that the NIO and Secretary of State were sold on participation on a less than honest prospectus - is seen to be justified.

Channel 4's Status

9. The Channel 4 Television Corporation is a licence holder of the Independent Television Commission. Section 6(1)(c) of the Broadcasting Act 1990 imposed a "due impartiality" obligation on Channel 4 as respects matters of political or industrial controversy or relating to current public policy. Channel 4 is also, by virtue of the Act, subject to an obligation to observe the ITC's code giving guidance on the due impartiality requirement. As a licence holder it is for Channel 4 itself to comply with the obligations in the legislation on programme content. But the ITC, as the regulatory body (it is not, like its predecessor the IBA, itself the broadcaster) has the job of enforcing the licence requirements, including the programming obligations.

Points to Make

10. Among the points the Secretary of State may wish to put to Mr Grade are:

- (a) Mr Grade will appreciate that the situation in Northern Ireland is complex, multi-faceted and volatile; has deep historical roots; and is the subject of a carefully integrated programme of Government policies which seek to tackle security, political, social and economic issues in a mutually re-inforcing way.
- (b) The close conjunction of two programmes on Channel 4 which have, in essence, argued in a simplistic way for highly tendentious theses - RUC collusion and "Troops Out" respectively - does no service to the people of Northern Ireland.

- (c) Moreover, these programmes did so in a way which many of those affected by them felt was uncritical and inadequately based.
- (d) It is unacceptable that the "Critical Eye" programme in particular misled participants as to the basis of their participation by not giving any indication that it would be arguing a clear "troops out" thesis. Moreover, the editing of interviews was more than usually selective and misleading.
- (e) The Secretary of State has no wish to second guess Channel 4 or the ITC on how these two programmes match up against the "due impartiality" requirement in the Broadcasting Act, or to trespass on questions of journalistic ethics. He wonders, however, what Mr Grade's own view is of these programmes. Was a single Commissioning Editor responsible for both programmes? Is Mr Grade personally satisfied with the way in which Channel 4 handled them?
- (f) No doubt Channel 4 did not intend to editorialise about Northern Ireland. But that is the impression which many viewers will have taken away. What instructions do Mr Grade's commissioning editors have for achieving due impartiality, and for ensuring that independent programme makers play fair with participants? What timescale do Channel 4 consider appropriate for achieving due impartiality of output in the case of intensely controversial issues such as Northern Ireland? Does Mr Grade feel that Channel 4 genuinely secured compliance with the ITC's guidance on the conduct of interviews [para 3.8(a)] in the case of the

"Critical Eye" programme? The "Right to Reply" debates following the programmes restored some perspective, but are no substitute for fair programme making and an impartial output.

- (g) In summary: the RUC has been besmirched - we and they believe unfairly - and are continuing to seek to obtain hard evidence to support the allegations against them. The NIO has been drawn in - dishonestly - to a simplistic programme about a complex situation to which the programme did scant justice. Both police and Government have grounds for complaint. We hope that future programmes on Northern Ireland matters will not give us the same cause for concern. Neither programme did Channel 4 credit.

11. Finally the Secretary of State should note the impending transmission of a 3rd Channel 4 programme on Northern Ireland, later in the day of his meeting with Mr Grade. The advance publicity material is attached (Annex C). I would suggest that we do not raise this programme in advance of transmission. If Mr Grade mentions it, the Secretary of State may wish to express the hope that its research has been thorough and professional - ie in keeping with the best traditions of documentary television.

(signed)

A WOOD

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