

# FREE PRESS

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## inside . . .

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- The nine-year squeeze on the BBC: background to the 1992 green paper
- Katy Ferguson asks: Does Pornography cause harm?
- Maurice Frankel with the latest on Mark Fisher MP's Right to Know Bill

## THE INVISIBLE MAN STRIKES BACK

MIKE JEMPSON Reports

CLIVE SOLEY MP, decried in an astonishingly literate, if inaccurate, *Sun* leader as one of the invisible men at Westminster – he has held Shadow Cabinet posts including housing and Northern Ireland! – has certainly set newspaper editors atremble with his Press Freedom and Responsibility Bill. Although the *News of the World* sent a lengthy written submission against the Bill, few national newspaper editors, and none of the tabloids, were willing to give evidence to the Parliamentary hearings on his Bill.

Leaders in the *Times* and the *Telegraph* argued that the Press should be left to improve their own standards with help from the Press Complaints Commission. But even Sir David Calcutt remains unconvinced about the ringing testimonials that the Press have showered upon the PCC.

It looks certain that Sir David, who was originally hired to take the sting out of Tony Worthington's Right of Reply Bill and John Browne's Privacy Bill in 1989, will now rule in favour of more draconian measures to prevent the Press poking their noses into the affairs of the great and the immensely rich.

### The Daily Error

Newspaper readers deserve a better deal

'GET IT  
RIGHT'  
SAYS MP



And the Government has already announced a reform of the libel laws to allow newspapers to respond quickly to threats of libel actions, and avoid high awards for damages. What does this mean for the Soley Bill, which the CPBF has been backing?

If the PCC swiftly accepts that its role must change, and that it should have a more investigative function in shaping press standards, it may survive – with the threat of new civil torts for intrusive behaviour by the Press hanging over those who insist on prying too closely or pruriently into private lives.

That could mean the Government will seek to close down Soley's very successful efforts

to subject the press to public scrutiny whilst asserting the freedom of the press to act for the public in a democracy.

Peter Brooke may attempt to kill the Bill with kind words and good intentions during the second reading, if the PCC offers to play ball. But any dithering by the PCC, or outbursts of anger by Tory backbenchers could mean that the Government will let the Bill go to committee to keep the pressure on the Press.

But new laws require parliamentary time, and one danger is that the Government will try to piggy-back its own agenda onto the Bill, rather than find time for a "Constraint on the Press" Bill.

Clive Soley has insisted that privacy legislation is not the way to improve press standards and is unlikely to accept amendments which take that route unless it is clear that "public interest" exclusions are built in, and that freedom of information legislation will be added to the statute book.

He also wants to strengthen the Bill by writing in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. That may be too high a price for the Government to concede to an opposition backbencher, even though support for Soley's Bill is growing. All the more reason for pressure from constituents and supporting unions to insist that their MPs are in the House on Friday 29 January to vote the Bill through to its Committee Stage.

## OPENING UP THE DEBATE ON THE BBC

Every year the BBC top brass organise road shows up and down the country with the misleading title, *It's Your BBC!* and invite the public to come along and ask questions.

The license fee we pay finances the BBC but, of course, in any real sense it isn't our BBC. The Board of Governors is appointed, not elected, and the corrosive effects of the Thatcher years resulted in "one of us" appointments, both of governors and top management. The 80s saw political intervention on an unparalleled scale in BBC affairs, with the result that any pretence to independence was laughable. Remember the *Panorama* programme during the 1992 general election pulled from the schedules because it traced the links between the Lawson boom and the current recession?

The new regime has actively pursued policies such as Producer Choice which undermine the morale and programme making capabilities of the BBC. And now we've the government green paper *The Future of the BBC* and hot on its heels *Extending Choice*, the BBC's view of its future role.

The CPBF believes that the BBC should remain the "cornerstone of public service broadcasting." Precisely what that means, and how it should be realised surely deserves more analysis and debate than that offered by the green paper, which invites us to send our views to MR EW Lister in Room 668 at the Heritage Department.

Why not a public enquiry, at the very least? We will publish a popular campaigning pamphlet on the BBC in February. After a decade of opening up broadcasting to market forces, with disastrous consequences, there's now an urgent need to present the case and argue for a well funded BBC able to fulfil its public service remit and deliver the widest range of programmes.

We need a BBC which is protected from political pressure and patronage, open and accountable to its viewers and listeners. Our pamphlet will provide the facts and ideas to argue this case, one surely worth campaigning for in the run up to the 1996 charter. GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

# SOLEY COMMITTEE TAKES EVIDENCE ...

*Freedom and  
Responsibility*

of The  
PRESS

**Bill**

CLIVE SOLEY MP

**FREEDOM AND  
RESPONSIBILITY  
OF THE PRESS BILL**

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

THE OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE  
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HEARINGS

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**The unofficial Parliamentary hearings into the Soley Bill brought tears, laughter, anger and farce to the Jubilee Room in the Palace of Westminster. The Press were given a mauling, though they put on a brave face on reports of the proceedings. Mike Jempson reports**

ON DAY ONE, the Committee met in camera to hear from a former Northern Ireland journalist whose life has been put in jeopardy and career wrecked by the unfounded allegation in a national paper that he was a high-ranking member of the IRA.

The public session began with Linda Townley (nee Joyce) describing how her life and career prospects had been ruined by false tabloid allegations that she had stolen intimate letters belonging to her boss, Princess Anne, and passed them to the Press. She described vividly how the press-pack laid siege to her brother's house forcing her to hide on the stairs for 12 hours.

Graphologist Diane Simpson claimed that a *Star* story about her research work with serial killer Peter Sutcliffe was a tissue of misquotes and inaccuracies, so keen were the hacks to dress her up as a "Silence of the Lambs" investigator.

Teresa McKeever broke down in tears as she and her husband explained their feeling when they discovered that a *Mirror* story predicting an imminent cure for their son's fatal disease was incorrect.

Former *Mirror* Executive, Neil Bentley, delivered an hilarious insight into the style of Robert Maxwell and the mind of the tabloid rat-pack, as he recalled the way he was treated by journos in search of sensational revelations about his former boss.

And veteran campaigner Bob Borzello treated the Committee to a catalogue of racist inaccuracies and innuendo in the tabloids as he explained his belief that the reader, as citizen, has a right to know that the information supplied by newspapers is accurate. The Soley Bill introduces the notion that 'third party' complaints, by those not directly mentioned in the story, should be taken heed of, since newspapers play a significant role in forming people's opinions.

On the second day it was the turn of organisations. The Rev Eric Shegog kicked off for the Church of England, citing those bastions of respectability, the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraphs* as purveyors of false impressions through inaccurate captions and repeating unchecked errors published elsewhere.

Former Press Council member, Baroness Hollis, delivered a splendid tirade about the failings of self-regulation. She clearly impressed the Tory dominated committee (despite being a Labour peer) and may have helped some of them understand why the Bill offers a more sensible way forward.

She was followed by the Spastics Society and the National Alliance of Women's

Organisations, who had much in common.

Both spoke of the damage caused by misrepresentation and neither received a particularly sympathetic hearing, which just goes to show what a long way there is to go before stereotyping is recognised as a problem, let alone tackled.

The media enjoyed themselves at the expense of Committee Chair Patrick Cormack, and his odd-ball colleague Michael Fabricant, for their neanderthal attitudes towards the NAWO delegates. Cormack even had to endure a full-page feature entitled "Boys will be boys" written by a woman contributor to *The House* magazine, which he edits.

Prof Phil Scraton and Ann Jempfrey from Liverpool's Hillsborough Project delivered the most moving evidence of the day, detailing the excesses of the press as they scrambled for ever more sensational snippets to fill out their coverage in the wake of the Sheffield soccer tragedy. They were able to show that the false impressions created by the press had directly impacted upon inquests as well as popular perceptions of what happened. They were also able to confirm that the *Sun* circulation in Liverpool dropped by 40 per cent in response to its gross and morbid handling of the story.

The session closed with a studied piece from Jonathon Caplan QC on behalf of the Bar Council.

The lawyers' submission to Calcutt recommending a series of new civil torts to provide protection from intrusive press hounds is expected to be influential.

One witness that was sorely missed was from Lloyds Bank. Other commitments prevented him from attending, yet the bank was under attack on the very day of the hearing.

The final day was a marathon for all concerned, lasting four hours, with MPs meeting for an unprecedented 8.30 discussion before rooms in the Palace are officially opened.

The death of his father sadly prevented Jake Ecclestone from putting the NUJ's case - only days after its Executive had decided to oppose the Bill.

The CPBF team, Tom O'Malley, Wendy Moore and Granville Williams, volunteered to go on first, having arrived early for their official slot. They presented a serious, coherent case for the Bill, backed up with case studies, historical analysis and personal experience.

CPBF NC member, Pat Healy, then delivered an excellent account of the workings of the NUJ Ethics Council (currently at the cen-

# FARCE AND TEARS AT WESTMINSTER

tre of continuing controversy within the union). Committee members were by turns impressed and astounded - they, like so many people, had not heard of the Ethics Council, pronounced it a 'good thing' and wished it well.

Investigative journalists Paul Lashmar and John Ware offered the views of an ad hoc cross-media group, who have serious doubts about the way in which the Soley Bill might be extended to further undermine investigative journalism. The Committee appeared to be offended by the arrogance of their tone, but it was too much to ask MPs and their heaviest critics to see eye to eye.

Then came the turn of the Editors.

The Newspaper Society and the Guild of British Newspaper Editors presented an aggrieved tone, believing that Soley's Bill tilts at windmills, since there has been a vast improvement in press behaviour of late, regional and local papers are better than the nationals at correcting mistakes, and anyway the PCC is doing a good job. There was embarrassment when the Newspaper Society were unable to explain the current composition of the PCC, which rather undermined their otherwise earnest contribution.

Mark Rutherford, *Financial Times*, and Peter Preston, *Guardian*, insisted that self-regulation was working, would work better, and the Press should be left to its own, admittedly faulty, devices. Preston said that the current generation of journalists are far better trained than in the past.

Donald Treford, *Observer*, completed the trio of national editors willing to face the Committee. He was critical of the haste with which the PCC was established, and saw room for much improvement. But he too felt the Bill was not the way forward.

Last but by no means least came the Press Complaints Commission, whose delegation numbered five, three of them with titles.

They put up a stout defence of their august if battered body, but the case rather collapsed when they too seemed unable to answer a simple question about how many of their members were directly associated with the newspaper industry (11 out of 16 including the Chair, Lord MacGregor, who had himself added two retired newspaper executives to avail the committee of experienced people with time on their hands, he explained).

By now the Committee had had enough, and Patrick Cormack, ever a stickler for punctuality, closed the session at 1pm.

The Bill had had its first proper airing, and despite the preference of some Committee members for harsher privacy legislation rather than the Soley Bill, they were left in little doubt that there is enough evidence both of impediments to press freedom, and examples of dubious behaviour to justify its reaching Committee.

The great value of the hearings lay in the opportunity it afforded for more thought about what shape the Bill should take. Whether the CPBF will agree with the modifications that may emerge will have to wait at least until the Second Reading.

Clive Soley has made Parliamentary history with his much publicised unofficial hearings about the purposes of his Freedom and Responsibility of the Press Bill.

Even if the Bill does not make the statute book, the hearings are likely to increase demands from MPs that there should be preliminary hearings of this sort before new Bills reach their Committee stage.

Too often MPs have had to debate the detail of Bills on subjects of which they cannot possibly be expected to have special knowledge. It leaves them with little defence against sophisticated lobbying by vested interests.

One heartening sign was the competition for places (only those who could be available for

all three eventual dates were selected). The enthusiasm of those taking part and the sophistication of their questioning suggested it was an exercise they all felt worth taking.

● *Members of the Committee: Chair: Patrick Cormack (C), plus Andrew Barnett (L), Winston Churchill (C), Quentin Davies (C), Michael Fabricant (C), Teresa Gorman (C), Bruce Grocott (L), Geoffrey Johnson Smith (C), Dame Gill Knight (C), Jeff Rooker (L), Clive Soley (L), Sir David Steel (LibDem).*

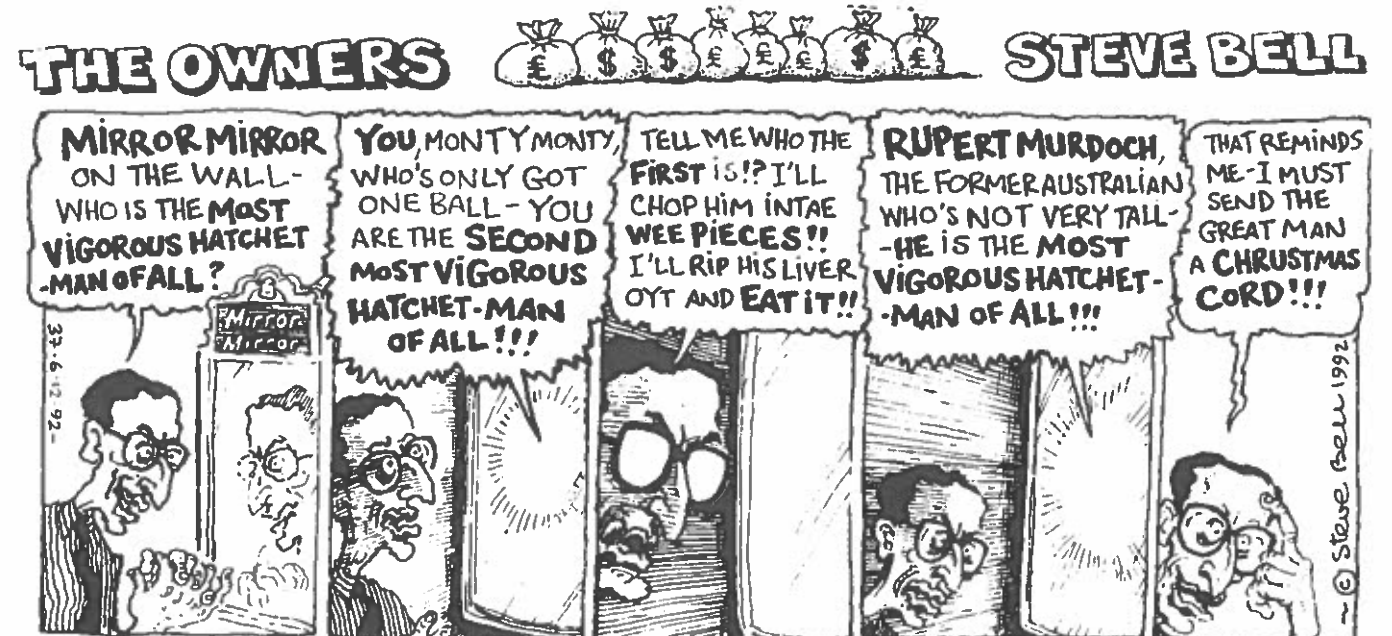
## Support on crucial vote day

The CPBF has been closely involved in developing the campaign around the Bill, organising a series of public debates around the country, and assisting in the gathering of evidence, the administration of the hearings, and building a lobbying strategy to ensure attendance at the Second Reading on 29 January.

Well over 100 MPs have pledged their attendance (though some may find themselves otherwise occupied if the Government Whips decide to organise against the Bill). However, there remain some 500 MPs who have yet to announce their voting intentions, so every CPBF member should make an effort to ensure that their MPs receive letters urging them to attend and vote for the Bill to get a Committee.

After the Report stage which follows clause-by-clause analysis in Committee, the Bill will go to the Lords for debate.

If it is to make it to the Third Reading sometime this summer or autumn, the pressure will have to be kept on.



# BBC THE NINE YEAR SQUEEZE BBC

## The Background to the 1992 Green Paper by Tom O'Malley

THE QUOTE opposite is not some recent leak from the bowels of Downing Street. This was written in April 1983. It was a straw in the wind signalling the start of a major assault on the BBC and public service broadcasting.

It was an assault which has led to the spread of market forces in broadcasting, in the form of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, and now, in 1992 to the government's Green Paper on the future of the BBC. The Green Paper, its genesis and perspective are rooted in the last nine years of controversy.

The Thatcher administration elected in June 1983 was intent upon altering the framework of broadcasting policy. There was money to be made from opening up the UK broadcasting market to more 'competition', and making it easier for 'entrepreneurs' to intervene in what was seen as a closed market - entrepreneurs like Mrs Thatcher's consistent supporter, Rupert Murdoch.

It was a closed market because the BBC and ITV operated a duopoly. They competed for audiences, but not for revenue and had to conform to a host of public service obligations. The CPBF, like many other progressive organisations, was and remains critical of the elitist, class-bound and detached nature of these broadcasting institutions. We had plans for change, but lacked the power to implement them.

Mrs Thatcher, and many of her colleagues, wanted to see an end to what they saw as the leftist, liberal bias of the BBC and sections of the commercial TV industry. There were opponents of Mrs Thatcher within her own cabinet, but in the end, on the BBC and on ITV, it was Mrs Thatcher's vision which held sway.

### What happened?

THE BBC'S application for a licence fee renewal was lodged at the end of 1984. The build-up to this application saw a sustained attack on the BBC and the licence fee from advertising agencies, the right wing think tank the Adam Smith Institute, and the Murdoch press. The

‘Already the case for the dismemberment or even the abolition of the BBC is gaining ground among the Prime Minister's advisers. And the Central Policy Review Staff (think tank) has been asked to consider the future of broadcasting policy.’

H. Davies

*“Do we really need the BBC?” The Times*

basic argument was that the BBC should be made more commercially accountable, preferably by bringing in advertising, or by breaking it up and selling it off. Thatcher made it clear in December 1984 that she supported advertising on the BBC.

In March 1985, the Government appointed the Peacock Committee to examine the financing of the BBC. Peacock was led, intellectually, by two men who were avid supporters of the free market, Alan Peacock and Samuel Brittan. The report, published in 1986, accepted the advice of economic specialists and rejected advertising as a source of finance for the BBC.

It did, however, argue that the whole of broadcasting, including the BBC, should

be restructured along market lines. It recommended introducing auctions for TV franchise, allowing independent producers into mainstream broadcasting, and driving the system towards funding by a mix of advertising and pay-per-view. It saw the BBC as, possibly, the potential provider, in the long term of a high quality, minority service, with the bulk of programming being driven by market forces.

It was the Peacock Report which provided the subsequent framework for the development of broadcasting policy from 1986 to 1992. The 1990 Broadcasting Act rested largely on the premise set out in Peacock, that the market should drive broadcasting. The result was the installation of a new regime for licensing and controlling commercial radio and TV and satellite.

This regime increased the possibility of takeovers in broadcasting whilst at the same time removing key requirements to provide high quality programming. The future, according to the government, was with the market.

### Changing the BBC ... an inside job

IMMEDIATELY AFTER the publication of Peacock, Conservative Central Office ran a sustained public campaign critical of the BBC. It was headed by Norman Tebbit and highlighted the supposed lack of sustained objectivity in the BBC coverage of the USA's bombing of Libya in April 1986. An expensive out of court settlement by the BBC in a libel case brought by Tory MPs against the Corporation was followed shortly afterwards by police raids on government premises to get hold of programme materials in the Secret Society series.

The controversy surrounding these events paved the way for the sacking of Alasdair Milne, the Director General of the BBC, by the newly appointed Chair of the Governors, Marmaduke Hussey. Hussey was widely seen as having been

appointed by Thatcher in order to clean up the management at the BBC. Shortly after Milne's departure, a new management regime was installed under the triumvirate of Michael Checkland, John Birt and Hussey. Heads rolled and old hands from the Milne era (1982-87) left shortly afterwards.

### A double squeeze

THE UPSHOT of all this was that the government got two things. Firstly, with the 1990 Act a fiercely competitive environment based on market forces in which the BBC had to operate. In a sense it had abandoned the idea of public service broadcasting by dumping it, largely on the shoulders of the BBC.

Secondly, it cut the BBC's income, and relied upon a new model, management, under the Hussey, Checkland, Birt regime to prepare the BBC for a more market orientated future. In a climate of reduced resources, BBC management began to systematically cut staff by introducing private contractors for much of the ancillary work.

It then moved onto a system of developing an 'internal market' for resources, following the economic fashion which has wreaked such havoc in the NHS. This is a system called Producer Choice, which, by allowing producers to buy in services for programmes either inside or outside the BBC, has led to job cuts and will also lead to major deskilling in the BBC and within UK broadcasting as a whole.

On top of all this, the BBC has started to raise money by doing deals with commercially funded satellite stations, notably SKY, and is itself introducing a new satellite subscription service.

### So what?

WELL, THE BBC is already on a downward path to becoming a minority provider of 'quality' programmes. It is what is embedded in Peacock and is, beneath the rhetoric, embedded in the BBC's response to the Green Paper. The changes in the legislative environment within which the BBC operates, combined with the philosophy and practice of its top management since 1987, has set

‘The BBC will have prime responsibility for supporting high culture and serving minority tastes, at least until pay-per-view television becomes more widespread’

*“Public Service: The Way Forward for the BBC is Quality not Quantity”*

The Times, 25.11.92

the Corporation on this path.

There has been a shift in government thinking since Mrs Thatcher was ditched in November 1990. The Green Paper under Thatcher would have been a much more market driven document. The government under Major, with Mellor and latterly Brooke at the Heritage Office, are prepared to see market forces drive broadcasting policy, but want, it appears, to hang onto a broadcasting service providing high quality news, drama and education - services which the new market regime cannot support. This may mean that under Major the BBC has a brighter corporate future than under Thatcher. But we should not get too carried away. Their vision is fundamentally elitist. It is that the bulk of the popula-

tion will want and get the downmarket stuff, and the rest, ultimately those who can pay, will get the best. It is a policy still deeply in harmony with the vision set out in the Peacock Report of 1986.

The Times, which for nearly ten years has pursued a policy critical of public service broadcasting, welcomed the Green Paper. It did so because the model embedded in it is one which accepts the current legislative framework which will allow market forces to provide the bulk of the programmes we consume. The BBC will, in a sense, become a sort of Radio 3 of TV providing riches for those who already have them:

“The BBC will have prime responsibility for supporting high culture and serving minority tastes, at least until pay-per-view television becomes more widespread.”<sup>2</sup>

The future of the BBC is bleak. The possibility of a democratically run alternative to this seems further away than ever. It is up to all those who believe broadcasting should be a public resource run in an open and accountable fashion to campaign for that future and to reject the one currently on offer.

### CPBF NEW WINTER MEDIA CATALOGUE

Books, videos and postcards over 100 titles. Send s.a.e. to CPBF National Office for a free copy of the media catalogue.

### A NEW YEAR APPEAL

The CPBF enters 1993 with a heavy workload and little in the bank. We are taking steps to generate more income. For example, our new media catalogue is now out and we hope readers, particularly people involved in media education, will respond to our January book sale. But we need secure long term funding. If any of our readers could take out a standing order, or increase their present one, this will help us to ensure the CPBF can continue to be effective in 1993.

# Does Pornography cause harm?

**KATY FERGUSON, Programme researcher**  
DOES PORNOGRAPHY cause harm? This question was posed in the recent Channel 4 Dispatches programme. The usual labels of left and right don't apply to the debate on the effects of porn. Feminists who want to restrict porn find themselves in an uneasy alliance with the church and moral majority. Liberals who think the case against porn is unproven or think that education rather than censorship is the answer find themselves on the same side as the kings of the pornography industry.

Research into pornography in this country is rare. A recent Home Office commissioned study into the effect of porn turned to North American research for evidence. The report was hesitant in its conclusions stating that porn must have a detrimental effect on attitudes to women but that the scientific evidence was inconclusive.

Laboratory experiments in North America have shown that sexual callousness and belief in rape myths increases after exposure to violent porn. Some question whether it is the violence or the porn that produces this effect. New research by Dr James Check of York University, Ontario has found that exposure to non-violent but de-humanising porn has just as harmful effects as violent porn. Check classifies three categories of sexually explicit materi-

al, violent, de-humanising and erotica. The first two he says are porn and are harmful the third, erotica which shows sex between equals has no harmful effects.

Last year the Canadian Supreme Court made a unique ruling concerning its obscenity legislation. Instead of defining illegal porn in terms of moral corruption or depravity the court used Check's categories to define what is harmful and therefore illegal. A blue movie store owner was convicted of selling illegal videos which were harmful to society - particularly women.

Describing Check's categories of sexually explicit material caused problems for the programme. It was important to state the case visually without prurience and within industry guidelines. Showing erotica ran into the double standard that whereas female nudity is acceptable, erect penises had to be pixilated. Precise definitions of dehumanising porn are open to subjective judgement. Material showing a woman with a dog collar being led around on her hands and knees was clearly de-humanising. Crotch shots which showed a woman's open vagina but no head or legs was not classified as dehumanising by Dr Check. Channel 4 had its own views on the suitability of images.

Advocating the restriction of porn may be seen as illiberal and prudish. This has to be contrasted with women contacted in the course of the programme who had suffered sexual attack or abuse who were convinced that porn played a role in their ordeal. The debate will continue.

## International conference on Women and the Media

Many thanks to all those women who returned the women's section questionnaire earlier in the year.

They showed that women in the campaign are interested in a wide range of issues.

For a lunchtime meeting at this year's AGM, the idea of a conference on women and the media emerged.

This is likely to be one of the Campaigns main initiatives on women's issues in 1993, and it will need help from members to get it off the ground.

Anyone interested can call Jo Treharne in the National Office on 071 923 3671 (Mondays and Tuesdays only).

Meanwhile, if you would like to contribute comments or ideas to Free Press, please send them to the Editor, Granville Williams, at the office.

## MEDIA MONITOR

### Pornography: Visible Harm? C4 Dispatches

An informative briefing sheet has been produced by Broadcasting Support Services to accompany Visible Harm, screened in November 1992. Sections cover What is Pornography? Evidence of Harm; Women's experience of Pornography and the Sex Industry.

The briefing also has a list of useful organisations and recommended reading. The briefing is available.

Send SAE with 18/24p stamp to: Dispatches; Pornography PO BOX 4000 London W3 6JX or Cardiff CF5 2XT

### Getting it right Disability and Television Guidelines on Representation for Producers

A twelve page booklet packed with valuable insights, examples, information and advice. The front cover photo is of disabled people protesting over Telethon and underlines the strength of feeling organisations of disabled people have about the way charity and fund raising events portray disabled people. The guidelines "are intended to help those who commission and make programmes to understand disabled people's demands and the thinking that underpins the debate about appropriate language."

Copies of the booklet from Ann Pointon, Coordinator, Deaf and Disability C4 60 Charlotte Street London W1P 2AX.

## Support the Right to Know bill

by MAURICE FRANKEL, Campaign for Freedom of Information

Mark Fisher MP's 'Right to Know Bill' comes up for second reading in the Commons on February 19. The bill would give Britain a freedom of information act, opening up official records to public scrutiny. It would also reform the 1989 Official Secrets Act, to create a public interest defence; create a right of access to employment records, in the private as well as the public sector; and require companies to publish more information in their annual reports. The bill is supported by the Right to Know campaign, made up of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, the CPBF, Charter 88, Liberty, Naigo and Article 19. It has all-party support, and a real chance of obtaining a second reading - but it's vital that MPs realise how much public support there is for the measure.

If you can please help by:

■ writing to your MP asking him or her to support the Right to Know Bill on February 19

■ writing to the minister in charge, William Waldegrave MP (Minister of Public Service and Science, 70 Whitehall, London SW1A 2AS) asking the government to support the bill.

■ if you have experienced any secrecy problems, let the Campaign for Freedom of Information (88 Old Street, London EC1V 9AR, Tel: 071 253 2445) know about them - they could be very helpful in illustrating the need for legislation.

■ if you would like a free information pack or can distribute leaflets about the bill, get in touch with the Right to Know campaign, c/o Charter 88, Exmouth House, 3-11 Exeter Street, London EC1V 9AR. Tel: 071 833 1988.

## Massaging Murdoch

IN 1957 Rupert Murdoch sacked Adelaide News editor Rohan Rivett. This was shortly after the paper's vigorous campaign over the case of Rupert Max Stewart, an aborigine convicted of raping and murdering a nine year old girl and due to be executed. The paper won the case, but Rivett was out of step with Murdoch's priorities.

William Shawcross in his recent biography\* comments on this incident: "Murdoch had had enough of advocacy journalism. He was expanding his empire and was more interested in cash than confrontation, in profits than in political positions. He wanted editors who were safe rather than scintillating, whom he could rely upon, however far away he might be. From now on that would almost always be so."

In a book of monumental length this is one of the few mildly critical comments on a key player in the world's media whose personality and business methods cry out for critical analysis. Shawcross has laboured several years to produce a eulogy to Murdoch. A seri-

ous assessment of Murdoch cannot avoid revealing a more uncomfortable reality. Politically he has subverted democratic processes to pursue his own agenda, and been adept at calling in heavy debts as the price of his support.

In Australia Murdoch used his media power to undermine Gough Whitlam's government in the 1970s. In Britain his allegiance to Margaret Thatcher's union bashing, deregulating fundamentalism smoothed over his press acquisitions, exempted Sky from ITC regulations and brought him control of the merged BSkyB.

Murdoch revoked Australian citizenship and became an American to leapfrog US broadcasting regulations prohibiting foreign ownership. Time after time Murdoch followed this pattern: political allegiances and support were mobilised to support the construction of an over arching media empire.

Financially, too, the record is appalling. He and his team ruthlessly exploited loopholes in the international tax system. They

## Digging down under

"AUSTRALIANS today are losing some of their liberty to dissent at a time when the country is undergoing profound changes and the need to ventilate dissent is critical" This is the view of Paul Chadwick, journalist and author of Media Mates - Carving Up Australia's Media.

And the chief cause of this loss is the concentration of media control in a few hands. In 1990 a Victoria state government enquiry into the adverse effects of media concentration highlighted:

- insufficient channels for the expression of opinion
- economic forces creating barriers to entry for others who might dilute that power and open new channels
- diminished localism of content and accountability caused by a group's size
- debilitated journalistic culture caused by reduced competition, self-censorship and lack of alternative employment
- conflicts of interest for owners of non-media interests

The Press is dominated by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation who own 66% of the daily press and 73% of the Sundays. The Fairfax Group, which, with the exception of Murdoch's Australian, publishes all of the country's quality papers,

emerged from receivership into the hands of Conrad Black, owner of Britain's Daily Telegraph.

"Dissent is being wrung from the mainstream," Paul Chadwick argues.

Successive governments of various political hues have tried to appease the media owners, or play one off against the other, rather than act in the public interest. John Pilger in A Secret Country describes this phenomenon when Murdoch was buying the Herald and Weekly Times Group in January 1987: "One MP told me, 'The hostility of Murdoch would mean my political death. So I shut up and I'm not proud of it'."

Paul Chadwick resigned from the Melbourne Sun, a Herald and Weekly Times paper, at the time of the Murdoch takeover to set up the Free the Media organisation. Like the CPBF in Britain, it has an important and difficult job to do, campaigning for a more diverse and democratic media. Good luck!

Material for this article has been taken from Index on Censorship January 1993, which has two articles on Australian media. The magazine, price £2.50, is available from 32 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4N 4SS.

**MEDIA  
in  
PERIL**



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by Granville Williams

\* Rupert Murdoch: Ringmaster of the Information Circus by William Shawcross. Chatto £18.00

dictum that you won't get poor underestimating public taste. And yet in June 1992 he summarily fired the Head of Fox TV, Stephen Chao, for bringing a male stripper onto the podium at a News Corporation seminar in Aspen, Colorado. The topic under discussion was the way in which moral and social values were being corrupted by film and television. "One thing this company has to stand for," the man who sanctions Fox TV's Studs and the owner of The Sun and News of the World, said, "is that there are limits." He should have told Sun editor Kelvin MacKenzie that, but of course you don't sack editors or get rid of a paper which has provided tens of millions of pounds year in, year out to launch a media empire.

The Shawcross biography doesn't offer a critical assessment. For a sharper insight into Murdoch's machinations get hold of Murdoch: Decline of an Empire by Christopher Hird et al. The title may be wish fulfilment, but the content is hard hitting and revealing.

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CPBF AGM and  
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**Saturday 15 May**

**Morning:  
Broadcasting, the  
BBC & the Charter**

**Afternoon:  
Opening up Our  
Secret Society**

**Sunday 16 May  
Annual General  
Meeting 10 - 1 pm**

**Venue: NATFHE,  
Britannia House  
Full details in next  
Free Press**

**PUBLIC MEETING  
NEWCASTLE**

**A Free and  
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Wednesday 20  
January 7.30pm  
Quaker Meeting House  
Archbold Terrace  
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**Clive Soley MP  
debates with Peter  
Sands, Editor of the  
Northern Echo.**