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NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE REFORM
OF THE OBSCENE PUBLICATIONS ACTS

N C R O P A

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The N.C.R.O.P.A. is affiliated to the National Council for Civil Liberties

NO/DAW/DP

7th March 1984

SENT TO ALL 65 M.P. SIGNATORIES OF THE N.C.C.L.'S CHARTER
ON CIVIL RIGHTS & LIBERTIES, PUBLISHED IN THE GUARDIAN
14/2/84 (WITH 6 VARIATIONS TO ACCOMMODATE THOSE HEREIN
MENTIONED BY NAME). (SEE NEWSPAPER CUTTING FOR LIST)

As an organisation affiliated to the National Council for Civil Liberties, the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts (NCROPA), was delighted to see that your name was amongst the signatories to and supporters of the N.C.C.L.'s Charter of Civil Rights and Liberties published in "The Guardian" on 14th February. At the same time, the NCROPA is puzzled as to why you, or indeed any of the other sixty-four M.P.s there listed can happily subscribe to so worthy a creed, but not oppose a monstrously repressive piece of anti-libertarian legislation like the Video Recordings Bill? During the Bill's Second Reading debate on 11th November last, not a single voice was raised in protest and not a single M.P. has subsequently spoken out publicly against it. Not only was there not a word of opposition from the sixty-five M.P. signatories to the N.C.C.L.'s Charter, not one word of dissent was forthcoming from the entire House of Commons complement of six hundred and fifty Members, not one of whom has had the courage to declare publicly what we know many believe privately, which is that this Bill is a nonsense, that it has been conceived in hysteria and that it is the kind of viciously authoritarian measure we usually associate in this country with the totalitarian régimes of both extreme left and extreme right wing dictatorships.

We simply cannot see how anyone can publicly commit him or herself to a Charter of Civil Rights and Liberties, Article 7 of which pledges to ensure and safeguard the defence of the "essential right" of "freedom of speech and publication", and at the same time support, however tacitly, this dangerous Bill. It is surely a complete contradiction in terms.

Some of the other M.P. signatories to the Charter have gone even further. They have not simply refrained from opposing the Bill, but have actually actively and positively supported and championed it. Mr. Denis Howell, M.P. has not only sung the Bill's praises both in the House and in Committee, but has assured us all that Mr. Gerald Kaufman, M.P. and Mr. Alf Dubs M.P., his two fellow Opposition spokesmen on Home Affairs, wholly endorse his views. Mr. Simon Hughes M.P. not only supported the Bill in the Second Reading debate, he was actually a sponsor of the Bill. Mr. Robert MacLennan, M.P., although subsequently expressing great concern over many of the Bill's implications during the

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recent Committee Stage, did, regrettably, give the Bill his support during the Second Reading. Mrs. Renée Short, M.P., although once a committed libertarian, saw fit to sponsor another fairly recent piece of repressive censorship legislation, namely the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act of 1982. Hardly a pro-'freedom of speech and publication' measure!

All these M.P.s are N.C.C.L. Charter signatories. If they, or you, are using the N.C.C.L. and its hugely commendable *raison d'être* for political expediency, it has to be exposed. If not, we shall expect to see you and them publicly demonstrating the sincerity of your unequivocal commitment, by speaking against the Video Recordings Bill during its Report Stage debate, and by preventing its further progress on to the Statute Book.

Finally, and most disgraceful of all, we note that not a single Conservative M.P. has endorsed the Charter. We would have expected all 395 Tory M.P.s to have rushed to sign without question, being members of a political party which claims the 'freedom of the individual' as the cornerstone of its whole philosophy. Speaking in the Rates Bill debate on 17th January, former Tory Prime Minister, Mr. Edward Heath M.P. reminded his colleagues in the House that he had been elected to the Commons in 1950 on Winston Churchill's slogan "Set the people free", (a slogan re-echoed by the present party chairman Mr. John Selwyn Gummer M.P. at last October's annual conference in Blackpool), but that that was not "a proposal to set the people free to do what we tell them to do". It seems that his timely reminder has fallen on deaf ears, including, of course, his own.

The Video Recordings Bill introduces the frightening and sinister concept of State Pre-Censorship for Adults in this country. The vast majority of adults do not want censorship. This fact was dramatically borne out by the findings of the survey carried out by the Video Trade Association. Out of more than 22,000 replies to questionnaires supplied to the general public, 81.4% were against the censorship of videos shown in private homes. Clear-cut, undoctored statistics of this kind cannot and must not be ignored and any civil libertarian who ignores them does so at his or her peril.

"The Guardian" advertisement has told us of your views on civil liberties. Please now tell us of your views on the Video Recordings Bill. We shall not, of course, expect them to be inconsistent, nor, we trust, your Parliamentary voting habits thereon.

We look forward to the courtesy of your esteemed reply.

Yours sincerely,

David Webb,
Honorary Director,
National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts