

~~GENCENSURED~~

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

25th January, 1984

The Rt. Hon. Leon Brittan, Q.C., M.P.,
Secretary of State for the Home Department,
Home Office,
Queen Anne's Gate,
London, SW1H 9AT.

Dear Mr. Brittan,

Your announcement in Berwick-upon-Tweed last Friday that you wish to stiffen the provisions of the Video Recordings Bill and ban completely, for home 'consumption', video recordings of adult sex films, which currently receive an 18R certificate by the British Board of Film Censors, has clearly demonstrated the hypocrisy of the Government over this Bill and shown that it intends to use it, not merely as a regulatory measure, but as a viciously repressive means of circumventing the already intolerably draconian provisions of the Obscene Publications Acts. This latest move emphatically vindicates the strong line the N.C.R.O.P.A. has taken against the Bill all along and endorses all our worst fears for the Bill's implications.

The National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts deplores your outrageous intention and urges you to withdraw such a hideously authoritarian additional measure in what is already a hideously authoritarian Bill. It is, at least, gratifying to know that the presenter of the Bill, Mr. Graham Bright, has expressed his disagreement with your view and the N.C.R.O.P.A. and the many organisations and individuals who have contacted us to indicate their horror at what the Bill already proposes, very much hope, and indeed believe, Parliament will support Mr. Bright and reject your proposal.

You said in your speech that "Even if it (a video recording showing sexually explicit material) can be bought only by people over 18, once it enters the home, there is no way of ensuring that children will not see it. The probability is that many will." With great respect, and even if one allows that such films seen by children under 18 would be harmful (which the N.C.R.O.P.A. certainly does not!), your argument for banning them completely is absurd. Alcohol is not banned from the home because children sometimes consume it (and almost certainly incur real harm to themselves in the process), neither is tobacco banned, nor glue solvents, not matches, nor carving knives, nor plastic bags, nor felt-tip pens (an eight year old boy recently died as the result of swallowing part of a pen) – one could go on ad infinitum. All these and many other products present constant potential dangers to children in the home, but society, quite properly and sensibly assumes, and indeed expects appropriate parental supervision and guidance to be exerted. It does not expect, nor want, a 'Big Sister' State nanny to take over its ordinary, individual parental

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responsibilities.

Apart from these considerations, what about the enormous number of households where there are no children? Are all these to be penalised in their free adult choice of viewing material, in the privacy of their own homes, because a handful of moral dictators have succeeded in 'conning' our legislators into believing that the whole fabric of our society is threatened by a few 'nasty' videos? The spurious 'evidence' they have produced to support this ludicrous assertion simply does not stand up to in-depth scrutiny. One consideration that has been constantly overlooked in all the deliberations on this overblown issue is that adults have their rights, too. I am, of course, thinking particularly of the rights of the millions of adult 'consumers', or potential consumers of home videos, whose views have, so far, been almost totally ignored.

In your Berwick speech you also claimed to have arrived at your decision "Having heard arguments on both sides of the question". That is, of course, untrue. You have not heard the arguments from our side of the question which is, as you know, the side representing these very people, that is the adult 'consumers', because you have consistently refused to meet us. It is a disgrace that neither you, nor any of your Ministers, nor the Bill's presenter, nor any sponsor of the Bill, nor any member of the Standing Committee C, nor, indeed, a single member out of a 650-strong House of Commons, has had either the courage or the courtesy to afford us a meeting to discuss this extremely contentious and important Bill.

May I re-iterate the timely words of former Conservative Prime Minister, Mr. Edward Heath, when speaking in the Rates Bill debate on 17th January, and when he reminded 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 at Blackpool). "It was not", said Mr. Heath, "a proposal to set the people free to do what we tell them to do." With those sentiments very much in mind, we once again implore you to reconsider and to agree to receive a N.C.R.O.P.A. delegation as soon as possible. Such a gesture would, at least, add more validity to your claim regarding full consultation with all sides.

Finally may I comment on what should have been a N.C.R.O.P.A. internal matter, but has ceased to remain so as the result of the initiative of one of the members of Standing Committee C, Sir Geoffrey Finsberg, M.P., who has raised it in the debates there?

Your Parliamentary Under Secretary, Mr. David Mellor, M.P., said in Committee on 18th January that you had "had the opportunity to consider all the matters that have been raised in Committee thus far." You will no doubt have read the official reports of those proceedings, therefore, and will be aware that Sir Geoffrey has made a number of, what we consider, unwarranted and abusive attacks on myself and members of the N.C.R.O.P.A.'s Executive Committee, as he also did in the Commons during the Second Reading debate on 11th November, when you were present. As a result of that first attack, and after he had written to me on 1st December (copy enclosed) in response to receiving a copy of our Critique of the Bill, I wrote back to Sir Geoffrey to defend myself and the members of my Committee, as you would expect. In that letter, dated 2nd December (copy enclosed) I refer to his comment about my statement in a covering letter with our Critique, dated 25th November, that the Bill introduces the sinister concept of pre-censorship by the State, which has erstwhile been a hallmark of repression almost solely associated with the totalitarian régimes of both extreme left and extreme right wing dictatorships. That December 2nd letter prompted Sir Geoffrey to make another vicious attack on us, in Committee on 14th December last. In that outburst he referred to the fact that the ~~the~~ Viscount Norwich had resigned from the N.C.R.O.P.A. executive committee, and read out part of his letter of resignation, a copy of which Lord Norwich had,

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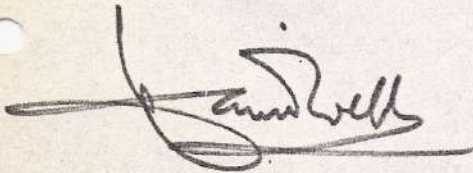
for some reason, seen fit to send him. In that letter, dated 5th December, Lord Norwich stated that "for some time now I have been concerned about its (N.C.R.O.P.A.'s) policies" and he went on later to say that "I cannot wholeheartedly endorse all the principles involved in your campaign".

In order to put the record straight, therefore, let me make it quite clear that the principles involved in our campaign are exactly the same as they were when I founded it in April 1976 and when I first invited Lord Norwich to serve on its Committee. A copy of my original letter to him, dated 3rd May 1976, is also enclosed herewith, as well as his reply of 12th May 1976 in which he expresses his unequivocal support for our cause. Lord Norwich has been kept fully informed of everything concerning the campaign ever since and, in the course of more than seven years, has never once expressed even the slightest doubt or disagreement with the N.C.R.O.P.A.'s principles or policies. That he should suddenly do so now indicates either that, for some extraordinary reason, he has impulsively changed his mind (something I find hard to believe of someone with Lord Norwich's pedigree and credentials or of his calibre), or, much more probable, has been pressured and panicked into doing so by mischief-making enemies of the freedom of expression.

There is, however, another aspect of this matter, which is ironical to say the least. You, and the Standing Committee, will have recently received a copy of the Campaign Against Censorship's Critique of the Video Recordings Bill. The C.A.C.'s attitude and opposition to the Bill is virtually identical to the N.C.R.O.P.A.'s. Lord Norwich is a listed sponsor of the C.A.C., together with twenty other members of the House of Lords and thirteen members of the House of Commons (including, incidentally, Mrs. Margaret Beckett M.P. and a member of the Standing Committee!). In the interests of integrity, credibility and consistency, we shall expect Lord Norwich now to withdraw his sponsorship of the C.A.C., and, likewise, Sir Geoffrey Finsberg to make similarly vicious attacks on this campaign, its committee and sponsors, as those he has made against us.

Finally, I have every confidence that, whatever the real reason for Lord Norwich's defection, he will come to regret his untimely action and will soon reverse it.

Yours sincerely,



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

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