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Thank you for your letters of 6 August to the Prime Minister and Mr Brittan about the BBC television programme "At the Edge of the Union" that was to have been shown in the recent "Real Lives" series. Your letter has been passed to Mr Giles Shaw, the Minister of State, who has asked me to reply on his behalf.

There have been occasions in the past when Ministers of both parties have thought it right to make representations to the broadcasters about particular programmes that have been, or are planned to be, transmitted. Such representations are not different in kind from those made by other organisations concerned about the possibly harmful effect of particular broadcasts, although one would, of course, expect the broadcasting authorities to take into account the particular experience and position of the source of the representations in considering whether to agree to them or not.

On 29 July, Mr Brittan wrote to the Chairman of the BBC to point out his concern that the "Real Lives" programme would give an immensely valuable publicity platform to people who advocated the use of terrorism. This in turn would bolster the morale of that small minority of supporters on which the terrorist depends and would alarm the innocent majority of the population whose intimidation is the object of such terrorism. It was the Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, chaired by Lord Annan, which concluded as long ago as 1977 that:

"Terrorism feeds off publicity; publicity is its main hope of intimidating government and the public; publicity gives it a further chance for recruitment. ...By killing and destroying, the terrorists are bound to extort publicity - and hence one of their ends - because such news will be reported. But there is no reason to abet them by giving additional publicity."

The Government share that view.

/ Mr Brittan

David Webb Esq

Mr Brittan made it clear that he was making these representations not as the Minister responsible for broadcasting policy, but as the Minister with particular responsibilities for the fight against terrorism. He said that he did not believe that the BBC would wish to do anything to give succour to terrorist organisations. He was not seeking to give directions to the BBC, nor to attempt an act of censorship, but to put before the broadcasters considerations which they ought properly to take into account at the right level within the broadcasting organisations.

The decision subsequently taken by the Board of Governors of the BBC not to show the programme was for them alone to take. In his letter of 29 July, Mr Brittan emphasised his firm commitment to the constitutional and editorial independence of the broadcasting authorities. That independence is not, and never has been, in question. Home Office Ministers, nevertheless, reserved the right, and continue to reserve the right, to make representations to them and to comment publicly on matters which fall within Ministerial responsibility. To question this right is, they believe, to misunderstand and to blur the clear and fundamental division of responsibilities that exists between the broadcasters and the Government.

Mr Shaw cannot accept your strictures about the Video Recordings Act. The Act provides for the classification of video works not, contrary to the suggestion in your letter, by the Government but instead by an authority designated by the Secretary of State. Particulars of a proposed designation must be laid before Parliament and a designation may not be made if either House resolves to the contrary within the prescribed period of 40 days.

The President and Vice-Presidents of the British Board of Film Classification have now been designated as the authority responsible for making arrangements for the classification of video works; and the Board itself will carry out these arrangements. The Board is an independent, non-statutory body, and the Government has no powers to influence or alter its decisions. The Board have been classifying films for the cinema for over 70 years, during which time they have accumulated much experience in this field, and in the Government's view they are very well qualified for taking on the task of classifying video works.

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