



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

4th March 1986.

The Editor,
"The Times",
1, Pennington Street,
London, E.1.

Dear Sir,

Far from being "regrettable", as Winston Churchill so described it, your leading article (24th February) on his Bill to amend the 1959 Obscene Publications Act was a most laudable, though long overdue stand against the intolerable, insidious censorship which now pervades this country. Whereas nearly all other countries of the free western world are reducing, have reduced or have removed censorship restraints altogether, the U.K. alone is increasingly obsessed by the need constantly to add to the vast array of weapons in the censor's armoury.

What Mr. Churchill's outrageously authoritarian Bill has demonstrated more clearly than anything are the absurdities and dangers inherent in any legislation which attempts to curb freedom of expression, and the impossibility of drawing demarcation lines between what is and what is not "obscene". That anyone should today still be trying to do what countless others have failed to do for hundreds of years is, to say the least, puzzling and guaranteed to end in failure, as Mr. Churchill has lately been discovering.

Mr. Churchill claims that the purpose of his Bill is the "protection of children" from exposure to "obscene" and/or violent material, on the assumption, presumably, that such exposure harms them. Notwithstanding that there is no proven link between such exposure and any subsequent anti-social behaviour, central to the Bill's framework is its sponsor's preposterous notion that any programme deemed unsuitable for children should not be transmitted on television or radio at any time. The net result of this would be that our literature, our drama, our art, our entertainment will be reduced to a common denominator of sanitized, sterilized, sanctified, soulless pap, of wall-to-wall "Blue Peter", "Songs of Praise" and "Jackanory".

It is also absurd for Mr. Churchill to claim that the other purpose of his Bill (letters 27th February) is "to restrict the availability to children of the more explicit brands of pornographic magazines." The 1959 Obscene Publications Act already does more than that. It prohibits their availability, and not only to children, but to adults too - even consenting ones. Mr. Churchill should be turning his attention to getting rid of this country's many repressive laws which so drastically curtail our personal freedoms, rather than adding to their number.

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Mrs. Mary Whitehouse's inference (Letters 3rd March) that the 1959 Act has not fulfilled its intention "to strengthen the law on pornography" is ridiculous. "Pornography", or fully sexually explicit material, is virtually unobtainable in this country as anyone who has been campaigning against these out-moded and draconian O.P. Acts for the past ten years, as we have, knows only too well. The trouble is that Mrs. Whitehouse labels everything of which she and her narrow, prudish mind disapproves as "pornography". The proposed Bill which she offered to Mr. Churchill say not have contained a so-called "laundry list" of perverted sexual practices" (incidentally Mr. Churchill's list contained prohibitions other than sexual perversions), but its ramifications would have been even more horrifying than his. Mrs. Whitehouse's "laundry list" embraced "any material portraying violence or cruelty, or of a sexual nature, or relating to any controlled drug" as being obscene if so judged by a "reasonable adult". Whatever else Mrs. Whitehouse may be, she is no "reasonable adult". It is dishonest of her to try to pretend that she was not behind the Churchill Bill or that her original version of it was less ruthless or more workable. It was nothing of the sort.

The NCROPA does not accept the necessity for this Bill and it does not believe that the majority of the public want it either. The chief responsibility for controlling children's reading, viewing and listening habits rests fairly and squarely on the shoulders of their parents. What adults choose to see is a matter entirely for themselves.

Parliament has seen fit to legislate in a much less harsh or prohibitory fashion with regard to many other things which are, or are considered to be, harmful to children. The sale of tobacco, alcohol and glue solvents, for example, is merely regulated where children are concerned, but not prohibited for adults. All these products are known, proven killers (every six days a child dies as a result of glue-sniffing). Yet Parliament deems it an acceptable ^{level} of 'protection' simply to make it an offence to sell them to children. Although we believe it unnecessary in the case of sexually or violently explicit publications, a similar regulation could well be introduced regarding the sale of such adult material to children whenever and wherever it was marketed or retailed.

We very much regret that Winston Churchill has allowed himself to succumb to the pressures of those well-known, but totally unrepresentative moral fascists who ceaselessly campaign for the legal imposition of their narrow standards and beliefs on all others, and has introduced a most un-typically un-Churchillian, un-British repressive measure. Drastic reform of the Obscene Publications Acts and many other related Acts, is long overdue, but not, alas, in the retrograde direction Mr. Churchill has taken. We, too, urge Parliament not to follow.

Yours sincerely,

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

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