

~~CENSORED~~

# 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

9th October 1989

Jack Straw, Esq., M.P.,  
House of Commons,  
Westminster,  
London,  
SW1A 0AA.

*Dear Mr. Straw,*

When you were president of the National Union of Students, in the late '60s, I remember commending your common-sense and tolerance and was delighted when you went into politics as a career. Since you entered Parliament, however, I have witnessed your frequent and worrying pronouncements on censorship issues with increasing concern and regret that my former enthusiasm has proved so misplaced.

Your recent article in "The Times" (published by Rupert Murdoch, who also publishes "The Sun", of course, famous for its pictures of "naked women ... in sexually provocative poses") entitled 'Too soon to end these ages of innocence' (Sept. 25th) expresses such alarmingly repressive and intolerant sentiments, that it cannot be allowed to go unchallenged and without protest.

In spite of all those earlier NUS sparkling displays of such good common-sense, at the ripe old age of 43, and as a shadow cabinet Education Secretary, you appear to be at a complete loss as to how to cope with the ordinary, everyday task of bringing up a nine year old child. If puzzlement over why so many people should buy "a record of a woman panting, then groaning, interspersed with the occasional mumbled phrase" is your child's only 'problem', I think you should count yourself very fortunate indeed. It certainly does not justify your almost hysterical castigation of what you describe as "soft porn", nor, for that matter, of "pornography" in general.

To begin with, your implied notion that it is impossible to answer a nine year old child's questions about sex truthfully without resorting to telling him "intimate details of the nature of sexuality" is, of course, absurd, and in any case, even if that were so, would make a nonsense of your claim to be happy for your children "to know about the biology of reproduction". However, if you really believe that your son is not ready for such mind-shattering knowledge, you should act as any other concerned, responsible parent would act, exert a modicum of parental control and not allow him to listen to Radio 1 or whatever other broadcasting station similarly offends you. Neither listening nor TV viewing is compulsory for anyone. There is always the 'off' switch. Mind you, I think it would be extremely hard on your poor, over-protected son, to be so insulated from the truths and realities of an outside world which he will, whether you like it or not, one



day have to come to terms with, but as a parent, you have that lawful right so to discipline him. What you do not have, however, is a lawful right to prevent others from taking what they would deem a more enlightened and realistic attitude than your own distorted vision permits. This is nothing to do with a 'denial of childhood'. By far the greatest difficulties caused to the balanced maturation of children are those created by the obfuscations, myths and lies fed to them by well-meaning but badly-misguided adults.

You are, of course, also entitled to disapprove of "Knave" and "Penthouse", just as I disapprove of publications like "The Catholic Herald", "Boxing News" and "Everywoman". But neither you, nor I, are entitled to prevent or seek to prevent the publication and free availability of these and other publications for others. Although you don't specifically call for the banning of "Knave" and "Penthouse" and the like, the clear implication is that you do sanction such legislative action, otherwise why would you support Clare Short's Bills for the censorship of press matter of which she personally disapproves?

Furthermore, you are straining the bounds of credibility when you express such purported 'startled-ness' that a "typical respectable, bespectacled middle aged businessman" should buy four "girlie" magazines at a station bookstall. Just who are you trying to kid? However, to equate that purchaser, almost certainly indulging in nothing more sinister than the pursuit of a little harmless sexual titillation, with someone who offered you sixpence "to go into the bushes with him", when you were nine (I wonder what the psycho-analysts would make of that curious coincidence?), is, frankly, a disgraceful assumption and quite unworthy of someone like yourself, who is, I assume, claiming to make a serious comment on a very important issue.

A comment you made which can, in no way, be taken seriously, however, is your claim that "the amount of pornography freely available in this country is unhealthy, and reflects a perversion in the values of society". This is utter nonsense. The amount of "pornography" freely available in this country is negligible. That is an indisputable fact, for the simple reason that this country has more legislative censorship restrictions than virtually any other in the so-called 'free' Western World. Can you, and the other members of Parliament who regrettably and shamefully share your views, not get this into your heads? This country is already positively saturated with censorship. Have you, a trained barrister, never heard of the Obscene Publications Acts, the Video Recordings Act, the Indecent Displays (Control) Act, the Customs Consolidation Act 1876, the Customs & Excise Management Act 1979, the Cinemas Act, the Post Office Act 1953, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, the Theatres Act 1968, the Broadcasting Act 1981, the Cable and Broadcasting Act 1984, the Local Government Act 1988 (Section 28!), the Telecommunications Act 1984, the Common Law offences of Blasphemy, Corrupting Public Decency, Corrupting Public Morals, Outraging Public Decency, Indecent Exhibition, Keeping a Disorderly House, etc., etc. - the list is seemingly endless!

Sexually explicit material (as it should rightfully be described - not as "pornography", which is so indiscriminately, irresponsibly and inaccurately used a term and which, as you will know, has no meaning in British law) simply does not exist in this country, as it rightfully does in 'grown-up' countries like France, West Germany, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Italy, the U.S.A., Australia and so on, - except in under-the-counter, illegal market-places, of which, as far as I am aware (and I have been running the NCROPA for more than 13 years) there are an infinitesimally <sup>small</sup> number. I do think you should at least get your facts right.

Secondly, your contention that this mythical availability of a vast amount of "pornography" (i.e. 'sexually explicit material') is "unhealthy" is also nonsense. Sex, an interest in and the pursuit thereof, is a perfectly natural, instinctive



human phenomenon. This is innately healthy, just as nutritional appetite is innately healthy. No-one castigates the free availability and vast proliferation of cookery books, even when compulsive eaters sometimes over-indulge themselves and become grotesquely (and indisputably harmfully!) obese. Sexually explicit books, mostly used as stimulæ to achieving orgasm by means of masturbation, not only do not harm anyone, but are often positively helpful by providing a useful and practical 'safety-valve' device for the relief and release of suppressed, unsatisfied and unchannelled potent sexual energy, particularly in the young. In this context, there is also a very powerful case to be made for the possible valuable use of this kind of material in averting unwanted and sometimes violent sexual attacks on unconsenting victims by the inadequate or disturbed criminal. <sup>its potential use in preventing</sup> Apart from these extreme manifestations of unacceptable anti-social behaviour, sexually explicit material often provides the only possible kind of sexual outlet for the disabled and incapacitated, or, indeed, for the simply unlovely, unloved, unfortunate - or just unlucky! You may be one of the lucky few who is fortunate enough to be favoured with a permanent, stable loving relationship within a family context, which is entirely self-satisfying and self-fulfilling, both sexually and otherwise, and good luck to you. But surely you're not so smug as to deny at least some sexual gratification, however vicarious and however inferior to the ecstatic joys of 'the real thing', to those many less fortunates of the kind I've described? Such necessary substitute sexual activities in no way reflect "a perversion in the values of society", but rather an honest acknowledgement of human sexual appetite and the crucial need for its appeasement.

Neither does "pornography" seek "the graphic subordination of women, and their treatment as objects for commercial exploitation". In any case, how does such a fatuous assertion relate to the large amount of homosexual "pornography" throughout the world? How can material of this sort, especially that involving males only, seek "the subordination of women"? Or perhaps you will denounce this also as another "perversion in the values of society" and, whilst you're about it, come out in support of 'Section 28' and all those repulsive homophobes from the Tory benches.

Incidentally, just because Clare Short says that this "constant and relentless imagery (of naked or semi-naked women) does affect the way that men see women, and the way women perceive themselves", and cites it as justification for censorship legislation, does not mean that it is incontrovertible testimony from heaven. It is simply her unproven opinion. It is not mine, nor the NCROPA's. Of course, what Clare Short, and now apparently yourself, wish to exercise is 'thought control', a chillingly Orwellian ambition if ever there was one and hardly compatible with the new anti-authoritarian image the Labour Party is currently at such pains to project.

Moreover, it ill behoves you to dismiss with such arrogance the freedom of the workplace and freedom of work choice to those who freely desire to appear in sexual material, simply because you and a minority of very vocal, fascistic feminists don't like it and wish to outlaw it; and I do not think I am being over-emotive here, if I respectfully remind you that Hitler began his rise to power by banning and then burning publications of which he disapproved, and ended up by burning people in the ovens at Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen. Suppression, in any case, won't lessen the demand for such material (indeed, for many there is an even more irresistible attraction for 'forbidden fruit') because, thank goodness, people will never cease to be interested in 'sex', and thus material relating to 'sex'. It flourishes because so many people want it. Your "normal and legitimate" interests may be confined to the exotic delights and sensuous thrills of gardening, car maintenance and home dress-making, but a great many others of us, poor degenerates like myself, cannot aspire to such dizzy heights of intellectual attainment and have to content ourselves with life's more basic, coarser and vile interests, like 'getting-one's-leg-over' and "bishop bashing"\*. I appreciate that these "nasty"

\* See Letters "The Guardian" 8th March 1988.



activities may not be "normal and legitimate" to you, but that's your problem.

You were, at least, honest enough to concede that whether or not "pornography" provokes or stimulates acts of sexual violence and abuse remains "open to great argument, and is virtually unprovable", but your suggestion that, in spite of this, "for once we should err on the side of caution" is quite unjustifiable and untenable.

Your choice of the disgraced and dishonoured 'crook' ex U.S. President Richard Nixon as your final champion of moral rectitude in your emotive but irrational - and certainly intolerant - piece of puritan propaganda, was, to say the least, unfortunate. Your version of events surrounding the presentation to Nixon of the findings and recommendations of the U.S. Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1970 was, however, more than unfortunate. It was untruthful, if only for what it left out.

The full context, which you chose not to divulge, but which is essential to any true understanding of the episode, is as follows:-

- (1) The Commission had been set up by Congress in 1967 and its members appointed by President Lyndon Johnson (of the Democratic Party - Nixon's rival)
- (2) Its original members unanimously expressed the opinion that obscenity and pornography in the media of communication and entertainment have no harmful effects on adults, and recommended the repeal of any legislation making its sale illegal. (Incidentally, our own Home Office Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship - the Williams Committee - made exactly the same recommendation in 1979. Disgracefully it has never been acted upon.)
- (3) During its 2 years deliberations (1968-70) Nixon had become President, but officials had discovered what the Commission was to report. This did not politically suit Nixon at all, and, after a number of failed attempts to sabotage the report, he resorted to appointing his own new Commissioner (Charles B. Keating Jnr., founder of 'Citizens for Decent Literature'!) who he knew would side with his own politically expedient 'morally upright' views. Ludicrously, Keating then produced his own dissenting 'Report'.
- (4) Nixon did not ask "how pornography should have no adverse effect if great literature could elevate mankind?" What he actually said was "The Commission contends that the proliferation of filthy books and plays has no lasting harmful effect on a man's character. If that were true, it must also be true that great books, great paintings and great plays have no ennobling effect on a man's conduct. Centuries of civilization and 10 minutes of common-sense tell us otherwise". (On the Presidential campaign trail in Baltimore, 24th Oct. 1970)

Notwithstanding that he had already forfeited any right to be listened to seriously because he had effectively pre-judged the issue by using such emotive and highly subjective blanket terms as "filth" and "smut" to describe 'sexually explicit material' of whatever kind, the rationale he then proffered in support of his treatise (that sexually material must have a lasting harmful effect) is so lacking in any real logic and evidence of hard fact, that it has no merit and must be rejected. His resort to mere "common sense" for justification of his views will hardly do either, since the world and history now know only too well just what "common sense" of the Nixon brand really consists of!

You challenged "those who sell pornography and make records like 'French Kiss'" to provide a convincing answer to the charge that their wares had no adverse effect on mankind. They do not have to. As a lawyer you should know that the burden of proof is on the prosecution. It is for the prosecution to prove the harm. So far

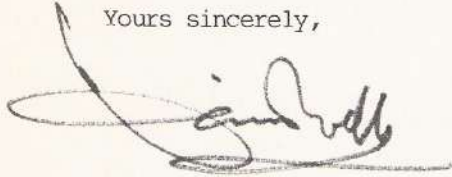
neither you - nor even Richard Nixon - have done so.

In that 1970 Baltimore statement, President Richard Nixon declared:-

"American morality is not to be trifled with".

In the light of subsequent events, I think that further comment would be superfluous!

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'David Webb', with a large, sweeping flourish extending from the left side.

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

Copies to: Charles Wilson, Editor of "The Times"  
Lil Louis