

Change of Obscenery

DAVID WEBB

Winston Churchill, MP, has secured a Second Reading in the House of Commons for his deceptively titled Obscene Publications (Protection of Children etc) (Amendment) Bill. Its purpose is widely to extend censorship of television programmes, films, plays, books and art. In this article the Honorary Director of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts takes a sceptical look at Churchill's Bill — and at some of its most zealous promoters.

On 17 January 1984, in a parliamentary speech denouncing the Government's rate-capping Bill, the former Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, recalled that he had first been elected to the House of Commons in 1950 on Winston Churchill's slogan "Set the People Free". "It was not", he said, "a proposal to set the people free to do what we tell them to do". On 17 January 1986, Winston Churchill, MP (Conservative, Davyhulme), and grandson of the illustrious defender of this country's freedom, published a private member's Bill deliberately designed to erode that freedom, and to erode it in so monstrously authoritarian a way, as surely to make poor old Grandad turn in his grave.

The Bill he is asking Parliament to vote into law is called the Obscene Publications (Protection of Children, etc) (Amendment) Bill. Its title does, of course, bear little relation to what the Bill is actually all about. Not that that is anything unusual nowadays, especially where Bills containing a substantial element of censorship are concerned, and the real intent of which our state legislative nannies are at such pains to camouflage. The 1984 Video Recordings Act should, truthfully, have been called the Video Censorship Act; the 1982 Cinematograph (Amendment) Act should have been called the Cinema Club Prohibition Act; and the 1982 Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act should have been called the Sex Shop Eradication Act.

Mr Churchill's intention is to amend the 1959 Obscene Publications Act by making television and sound broadcasting subject to its provisions, by making it illegal for *any* innocuous sex magazines to be displayed and sold on any premises (e.g. newsagents, bookstalls etc.) to which persons under the age of 18 have access, and by strengthening the test for "obscurity" (whatever that is!) for publications in either of these categories (i.e. in the home for TV and radio and, except for a handful of licensed sex shops, virtually everywhere else outside the home for books and magazines). He is doing this under the well-used but phoney guise of "protecting the children". "It is", said Willie Hamilton, MP (Labour, Fife Central), "a highly emotive phrase . . . designed to deceive people into believing that children in alleged danger from exhibitions of violence and television programmes need to be protected".

The Bill was given its Second Reading by 161 votes for and 31 against, in a five hour, vomit-making, but often farcical debate in the Commons which, for my sins, I witnessed from a cold, draughty, hugely uncomfortable, badly lit, appallingly-amplified and hostilely-staffed Strangers' Gallery. These grim deprivations were further compounded by the presence of a sorry collection of God-botherers, moral re-armers, born-again killjoys, Jesus junkies and of course, Queen Prude herself, Mrs Mary Whitehouse.

Notwithstanding that the Bill appears to have been drafted by a motorway contractor, so full of holes is it, a point forcefully made by Robin Corbett, MP (Labour, Erdington), some of the observations made upon it by Members present transcended the bounds of credulity. Mr Churchill himself kicked off by referring to the "increasing amount of obscene material transmitted into millions of homes" and claiming that "there is readily available a new brand of highly explicit sex magazines sold too often by local newsagents . . . or at bookstalls". I've obviously been missing out somewhere. I can't *ever* remember

having seen any "obscene" material on TV, except in news programmes, and, as an actor with more than 700 TV programmes to his credit, I certainly can't ever remember appearing in anything even remotely "obscene". As for this "new brand of highly explicit sex magazines", what and where are they, I would like to know? The present savage censorship laws would prohibit them anyway. When I met Mr Churchill to discuss his Bill at the Commons on 13 February, I challenged him to point me in their direction. He declined to do so.

Mr Churchill acknowledged that he was taking on two enormously powerful vested interests "on the one hand, the moguls of the media . . . and on the other, the pimps and pornographers of the multi-billion (yes, *billion!*) pound sex magazine industry". Interesting, isn't it, that, in spite of the fact that he was accusing both of disseminating obscene material, he didn't refer to the pimps and pornographers of the media or the moguls of the sex magazine industry? Ignoring his absurdly exaggerated figure, has he never stopped to consider *why* the sex magazine industry thrives? Has he never heard of market forces and of customer demand? If not, I'm sure his party leader will readily enlighten him. She might, at the same time, like to remind him of that purported cornerstone of Tory philosophy, viz. "the freedom of the individual".

The most sickening aspect of the debate was the spectacle of well-known MP playboys and adulterers pontificating about morality, and standards, and hypocrisy. Was it not Nicholas Fairbairn, MP (Conservative, Perth and Kinross), who had to resign as Solicitor General for Scotland? What of certain "indiscretions" in his personal life? Winston Churchill himself has not been exactly untainted if press reports of his past extra-marital activities are accurate. Worst example of all, however, was surely the nauseating, sanctimonious drivel pouring forth from Geoffrey Dickens, MP (Conservative, Littlebrough and Saddleworth), whose much-publicised *Cafe Royal Thé Dansants* added to the nation's glee a few years ago and was something of a public scandal. Not that I wish to be censorious, but when such people set themselves up on a pedestal of undiluted virtue, they must expect to be shot at. What bare-faced effrontery for Mr Dickens to cite the pitiful plight of children subjected to television and saying that "They associate it with their family, with what mummy and daddy might do". Dale Campbell-Savours, MP (Labour, Workington), although a fellow supporter of the Bill, took him to task. "Will he (Mr Dickens) tell the House on what basis he was able to build a reputation as a pontificator on public morality?", he asked.

However, for my money, Willie Hamilton's comments were by far the most heartening and exhilarating. He said things in that debate that I have been longing to hear said in the House of

Commons throughout the past ten years, ever since I founded the NCROPA in 1976. How refreshingly honest to hear him describe masturbation as a perfectly normal activity ("especially in public schools"!). "Apparently", he said, "it is to be illegal only if one takes a picture of it". With bitter irony he concluded "When I look at the Tory Benches, I see the honourable Member of Davyhulme (Winston Churchill), who is well known for his sturdy defence of morality and our standards of behaviour, and others like him. But when Tory Members lecture us on those matters it makes us angry and nauseated".

Unfortunately there are hypocritical "rogues", as he called them, in his own party, too, and in other parties. We can only hope that Mr Hamilton's great, good, common-sense logic will rub off on his parliamentary colleagues. "I do not want anybody to tell me by legislation, or in any other way, how to deal with my children or what I should read or look at", he said. "There are many do-gooders telling me what is good for me and my children. I do not want that. The more individual freedom there is, the better. I shall be the judge, for good or ill, of what is good for me. I do not want anybody to tell me what is good for me and my family".

After the cheerless speeches of so many others in favour of the Bill, especially the almost hysterical homily from Sir Ian Percival, MP (Conservative, Southport), in which he dazzlingly demonstrated his extensive vocabulary by using the word "filth" some 13 times, Willie Hamilton's words were music to my ears. I'm certain that they would have been music to Winston's ears, too — Grandad Winston, that is of course. In his autobiography, *My Early Life* (now a Fontana paperback), Winston recalls his involvement, whilst still a Sandhurst cadet, with the Entertainments' Protection League, which he and another student endeavoured to establish to combat the activities of 1894's Mrs Whitehouse, one Mrs Ormiston Chant, and her Purity League to clean up the music halls of the time, relating how he had joined in when two or three hundred patrons of the old Empire Theatre in Leicester Square tore down canvas "prudery" screens which had been erected in the theatre. "You have seen us tear down these barricades tonight", said Winston. "Make sure you remember those responsible for them at the coming election". Whether or not his plea was acted upon, I don't know. But I certainly hope that the present electors of Davyhulme will remember what their Winston has done when their next election comes, by his disgraceful betrayal of freedom and his family forbears.

The Establishment's obsession with censorship in this country now amounts to positive derangement. It must be dealt with immediately. By throwing out Winston Churchill's awful Bill, Parliament will be taking a first step towards a return to sanity. We can only hope it has the sense to do so.