

The Video Inspector Cometh

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The campaign to censor video cassettes has been carried to Westminster and is receiving little opposition in either House. The Honorary Director of the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publication Acts asks why libertarian champions of "freedom of speech and publication" have allowed this latest imposition of censorship to pass virtually unchallenged.

I suppose that, given the hypocrisy, bigotry and self-righteousness that so pervades the Establishment of this country, it was inevitable that the advent of the video cassette recorder would initiate the predictable, nauseating hue and cry we have witnessed throughout most of the past year and which is being currently perpetuated by their lordships in what was once thought of as the home of radical causes.

The campaign against the free availability of video cassette recordings for home consumption—that is against consenting adults being free to choose for themselves what they view in the privacy of their own homes—originated, again predictably enough, in the ranks of the "Puritan Brigade", aided and abetted by assorted religious groupings, and especially by an absurdly fanatical and dishonest Press campaign unleashed in the columns of the *Daily Mail*. In no time at all, Mrs Thatcher had joined in the clamour, "Victorian Values" she while proclaiming, and had promised, if re-elected in the June 1983 General Election, firm Government action on "video nasties" (whatever they are) in the Conservative Manifesto.

Mr Graham Bright, Tory MP for Luton South (ironically, my birthplace), practically fell over backwards to ingratiate himself with the Leaderene by offering to put his fortuitous first place draw in the Private Members' Bills Ballot at her disposal and introduce what we now know to be one of the most monstrously repressive and authoritarian pieces of legislation to have come before Parliament in modern times.

Mr Bright, and of course the Home Office (for this is, in effect, a Government Bill), have claimed throughout that its aims are merely the very limited ones of preventing children from buying or hiring video cassettes of "a violent and horrific nature". This is outrageously untruthful, as those of us who have been present in Parliament for most of the passage of the Bill thus far, know only too well. Even its title is untruthful. It should rightly be called the Video Censorship Bill. Not only will the Bill as originally drafted require virtually all videos to be certificated by the State Censor (for even the exemptions are so vague and arbitrary as to be dangerously uncertain), but many will be refused certi-

ficates and will be banned altogether. Furthermore, many amendments have been and are still being tabled seeking to strengthen and extend the Bill's powers still wider and a number of these have already succeeded.

For the first time since the repeal of the 1843 Theatres Act, as a result of the passing of the 1968 Theatres Act (an Act "to abolish censorship in the theatre", as its preamble states), the concept of pre-censorship by the State will be introduced into this country. Even television programmes already transmitted by the two public service broadcasting authorities, the BBC and the IBA, and consequently already subject to the very rigid scrutiny and codes of conduct imposed by those august bodies under the various broadcasting Acts, even they are not to be exempted from certification by the new State Censor. Finally, even when a video has received a certificate from the "designated authority", as the official State Censor will euphemistically be called, that video and its suppliers will still not be immune from possible prosecution under the provision of the extant and monstrous Obscene Publications Acts.

One would have thought that such a Bill, with its chillingly Orwellian overtones, and the kind of viciously authoritarian measure we usually associate in this country with the totalitarian régimes of both extreme Left and extreme Right-wing dictatorships, would have invoked a storm of protest and outrage from our MPs, or at least from those who claim to champion civil liberty causes. Out of 650 Members of the House of Commons, not a single one has had the courage to declare publicly what we know many believe privately, which is that this Bill is a nonsense and that it has been conceived in hysteria, and to vote against it. True, MPs like Robert MacLennan (SDP, Caithness and Sutherland) and Matthew Parris (Conservative, Derbyshire West) did express some grave reservations about the Bill whilst in its Commons Committee Stage, but both voted for it at its Second Reading and Report Stages.

On 22 February the National Council for Civil Liberties published a full page advertisement in the *Guardian* to celebrate its 50th anniversary, and nearly a thousand people put their names to a Charter of Civil Rights and Liberties. Article Seven of that Charter pledges to ensure and safeguard the defence of the "essential right" of "freedom of speech and publication". Amongst those signatories were 65 MPs. Where on earth had they all been, I wondered, throughout the passage of the Video Recordings Bill through the Commons, and how could they possibly reconcile their public endorsement of "freedom of speech and publication" with their support, loudly proclaimed by some, of a piece of legislation so blatantly an erosion of such a freedom? I wrote to

all 65 of them. Of the 19 replies I received, the gist of most of their answers was that they saw nothing inconsistent in the two diametrically opposed actions they had taken. It seems that words like "principle" and "rational debate" lose all meaning, even to otherwise sane minds, when the emotive issue of censorship raises its frequent and ugly head in this country. Two and two make four, apparently, but three and one do not, it seems.

The only real voice of sanity to make itself heard in this otherwise lunatic debate, as it has done on so many previous occasions to strike a blow against intolerance and repression, has been that of 85-years-young Lord Houghton of Sowerby. What a shining example he is to us all, but how disheartening it must be for him to receive so little real support for his courageous and unswerving stand on these matters, especially from his younger colleagues who should know better.

Lord Houghton wanted to know in the Lords Committee Stage Debate on 27 April "why is there

concealment of the real truth of this Bill in the short title; the long title and in the manner of approach to Clause one, which is interpretation?"; and he later went on to say, "This Bill is really dealing with some of the fundamental principles of our liberties and our freedom". I fear, however, that his wise words will fall on deaf ears, even those of the sixteen Members of the Upper House who also signed the NCCL Charter. There seems precious little hope of any substantial changes for the better in the Lords, and often considerable danger that the Bill's provisions will be made even more draconian. Perhaps the best bet for libertarians like myself is to welcome the passage of the Bill into law. Maybe when "Big Brother Brittan" and his State Censors actually begin to go into action, the full horror of the Bill's implications will at last be realised by the docile, long-suffering British public and their lily-livered legislators, and they will wake up to the fact that it really is 1984 and the Video Inspector really cometh.