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The Writers' Guild of Great Britain

Seminar on Censorship

When I founded the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts, 13 years ago, I did so for two reasons - (1) To fight Mary Whitehouse and her National Viewers and Listeners' Association; and (2) To fight and get rid of unjustified censorship in this country, particularly censorship of matters sexual.

At that time, in 1976, Mary Whitehouse was still largely treated as a joke, but, and in spite of Sir Hugh Carleton Greene's staunch and laudable stand against her demands and antics when he was BBC Director-General, it was becoming increasingly evident that she was making a mark and that her outcries were beginning to be heeded, particularly by some pious politicians. In fact some nine years before I was already conscious of just how potentially dangerous this, (in John Mortimer's words) "appalling phenomenon" could be, and the initial idea for setting up an organisation to try to combat her excesses was conceived in a ~~mobile~~ caravan dressing room I was sharing with the much lamented Leonard Rossiter in 1967, on location in the distinguished surroundings of Blenheim Palace whilst we were working on a somewhat less distinguished feature film, (although it did boast a distinguished star, Marcello Mastroianni, and a distinguished director, Christopher Morahan.) To my shame, ^{I'm afraid I} did nothing more about it until 1976, in the wake of the ridiculous "Inside Linda Lovelace" trial. The Mary Whitehouse joke was ^{by then, as far as I was concerned} already well and truly over.

People often ask, but why your particular concern with the Obscene Publications Acts? Well, in our naive and earnest attempt at utter honesty, we wanted the name of our organisation to reflect clearly what we were all about - and what we were about was an endeavour to identify just where freedom of expression, in all media, was being most effectively blocked in law. There was no doubt that, at the core (some might say 'hard' core!) of the trouble, were the iniquitously harsh, outmoded and, above all, unfair Obscene Publications Acts. Of course we were also

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aware that there were many other Acts or bits of ~~the~~ law which would need revising or amending to achieve our ultimate aim for the removal of virtually all censorship for 'consenting adults' - in line with most other countries of the so-called 'free' Western World - but we believed, and still believe, that if these repressive O.P. Acts went, much of the other offending subsidiary measures would soon go too, ^{they would have to}
e.g. certain parts of customs, postal and cinema legislation.

^{formed}
~~were established~~
In the 13 years since we ~~formed~~ ~~established~~, whereas nearly all other Western countries have effectively dispensed completely with ^{our} ~~such~~ draconian O.P. Acts-type measures, the situation in this country has not simply stood still, but even more censorship legislation has been enacted, and every year ever more is contemplated and added - the Indecent Displays (Control) Act, the Video Recordings Act, the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act and now the Broadcasting Bill in which it is intended to extend the provisions of the Obscene Publications Acts to broadcasting and to subject all broadcasters to state censorship via ^{that and} the diktats of an authoritarian Broadcasting Standards Council. It is an indisputable fact that the U.K. now has more censorship than any other country of the free Western World. Successive governments ^{here have been positively} ~~are~~ obsessed with censorship and we are ^{thus} ~~thus~~ ^{effectively stifled by it.} ~~satisfied with censorship.~~

All very true, you may say, but here you're largely preaching to the converted. We all deplore censorship. What puzzles, and at times greatly angers, me ^{however} is that if there is such real opposition to censorship, why is there so little public outcry against it and why, even when its wrongs are freely acknowledged, do so many - very often people of eminence and integrity, and sometimes power - why do so many refuse to articulate and pursue their condemnation. Why are they so afraid to stand up and be counted? *To come out, if you like?*

I believe I know the answer. (THERE'S A CLUE IN THIS BADGE THAT I'M WAERING etc). I believe it is generally a great deal to do with the social and historical background of this island country, where hypocrisy and snobbery is certainly the name

of the game, if not an endemic disease; and specifically, as far as open support for the NCROPA's principles is concerned, ^{it is} to do with not being seen to have any association with or any brief for what is so haphazardly and recklessly described as 'obscenity'. The whole concept - of 'obscenity' - is an absurdity, as is all too clearly demonstrated by the lottery-like interpretation it is given by different courts and different juries. (Cite the JOHN LINDSAY trials if time) Such entirely subjective terminology should never be used in any legal statute. The absurdity is compounded in the case of the Obscene Publications Act, however ^{as you will no doubt know} by an attempt to define the indefinable - as that which tends to "deprave and corrupt". The trouble is that to the world-at-large, the notion of 'obscenity' is something that is undeniably and inevitably 'dirty', 'disgusting', 'vile', certainly something quite 'beyond the pail' ^{something} that ~~is~~ ^{is} 'respectable' people don't have anything to do with. It is this emotive response which is ^{so} played on by the Mary Whitehouses of this country and which the continued existence of the concept of 'obscenity' in British law forcefully helps to perpetuate.

And therein lies the great difficulty we have, we believe, in getting more people, including people like yourselves, to recognise that the only way forward in the battle against censorship, is the enactment of drastic reforms to our laws. The elitist view that ^{is} ~~is~~ often proffered, that it doesn't matter to me because "I don't write that kind of book", or "I don't paint that kind of picture", or "I don't make that kind of film", simply is not good enough. It means that you are drawing a judgemental line between what you think is acceptable and what is not. You are, in effect, setting yourself up as a censor. We are also increasingly conscious of some erstwhile fervent supporters of our cause becoming less inclined publicly to voice their still genuinely held deep-seated fears of these inhibiting and unnecessary laws. Motives for this are not easy to pin down, but there is no doubt that a kind of 'chill factor' often appears to be operating in certain areas of influence which wasn't operating before. I know from my own experiences, for example, how often media people, journalists, television current affairs programme makers, have displayed acute nervousness ^{over} giving the NCROPA an appropriate and fair share of coverage

of its point of view. ^{Incidentally,} In the whole of the 13 years existence of the NCROPA, I have never been afforded a single BBC television interview. Even planned participations or interviews have, by one means or another, ^{always} been frustrated or sabotaged. This more recently seems to have spread to commercial television channels, and access to the media, as far as we are concerned, has definitely become even more difficult, whereas Mrs. Whitehouse only has to sneeze and its given media saturation coverage! Only a few Mondays ago "BBC Breakfast Time" transmitted a National Viewers and Listeners' Association promotional videotape - in other words a free commercial! - in celebration, can you imagine, of that organisation's 25th anniversary - an organisation which has done everything in its power to subvert, damage and damn near destroy the BBC.

We are, I have to say extremely critical of all the agencies of communication, and especially their bosses and chiefs, for allowing censorship to flourish and freedom of expression to be so eroded in this country, with so little protest or positive action. ^{to oppose it.} Mary Whitehouse and her loud-mouthed, bible-bashing cronies are not representative of the majority of UK citizens, but even if they were, minorities have their rights, too. Even Margaret Thatcher declared, only last Tuesday, ~~albeit colossal hypocritically,~~ that "freedom of expression is a fundamental part of a free society" We simply mustn't allow her to get away with such colossal hypocrisy, when for the past nine years she has so ruthlessly presided over such flagrant repression ^{of the media.}

My cri-de-coeur, therefore, is for much more vocal and visible protest, ^{much less equivocation,} much more honesty, much less elitism, - and for much, ^{more} much positive support and understanding for the NCROPA and what we are trying to ^{achieve} - in all our interests.