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Women's Group - St. John's College, Oxford

I'm very grateful for this opportunity to talk to you this afternoon about censorship, so-called "obscenity", and the law reform campaigning organisation I founded some 13½ years ago, the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts (NCROPA), particularly since it is the first invitation I've had from a women's group during those 13½ years. I shall keep my talk fairly short so that there is plenty of time for questions and discussion afterwards.

When I founded the NCROPA in 1976, 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 the censorship of sexual material.

At that time, Mrs. Whitehouse, although still widely regarded as something of a joke, was, quite clearly, beginning to exert what I regarded as an improper influence, especially on some ~~public~~ publicly pious politicians, and in spite of her formidable adversary, the then BBC Director General, Sir Hugh Carleton-Greene, who adopted a staunch and, to my mind, entirely laudable stand against her. I had, of course, been uneasily conscious of just how potentially dangerous this - in John Mortimer's words - "appalling phenomenon" could be, <sup>long before that, in fact,</sup> some nine years earlier in 1967. It was, as it happens, in a caravan dressing-room I was at that time sharing with the late hugely talented and much lamented <sup>actor</sup> Leonard Rossiter, parked not a million miles from here in the distinguished surroundings of Blenheim Palace, and whilst we were on location for a rather undistinguished (as it sadly turned out) film called "Diamonds for Breakfast", it was there that the idea for the National Campaign for the Reform of the Obscene Publications Acts was conceived. I was deep in "The Guardian", having warded off Leonard's and another actor's pleas for me to join them at poker - I absolutely loathe playing cards, so I can't be all bad, can I? - when I lighted on yet another piece about some petty complaint or other from Mrs. Whitehouse. Unfortunately the angry outburst and passionate vows about what I was going to do about this dreadful woman which <sup>resulting</sup> this immediately provoked in me remained, to my shame, unimplemented for nearly another decade, before I began really to put my money where my mouth was. But at least the seed was sown.

What finally sparked me into action was a particularly absurd Old Bailey trial of a rather small-time publisher called Heinrich Mannau who had published an almost unnoticeable, rather tatty little paperback entitled "Inside Linda Lovelace", which purported to be the ghosted biography of the star of the celebrated American 'porno-movie' "Deep Throat". For those unversed in these matters, "Deep Throat" has the somewhat fanciful storyline - and why not? - of the adventures of a girl who discovers that, by an extraordinary freak of nature, her clitoris is situated in her

larynx.

The outcome of this extremely costly, much-hyped trial was that the book was acquitted - or rather that the publisher was acquitted of publishing an "obscene" publication - a vast amount of taxpayers' money had been recklessly frittered away, and the publisher, as the direct result of all the valuable publicity the trial had afforded his insignificant book, made a small fortune from its subsequent huge sales.

I hope this goes some way to explaining my particular concern with the Obscene Publications Acts and why I feel they are so wrong, although I'm much more concerned with those who are <sup>alas,</sup> ~~not~~ acquitted, <sup>and perhaps</sup> ~~but~~ even more with the restricting and inhibiting 'chill factor' the mere existence of these Acts imposes. As an anti-censorship organisation, people often criticise us for our name but, in our perhaps naive and earnest attempt at utter honesty, we wanted the name of our organisation to reflect clearly what we were all about (unlike some other opponents' organisations, like 'CARE Campaigns' and 'Campaign Against Pornography and Censorship', about which more later). What we were all about was an endeavour to identify just where freedom of expression, in all media, was being most effectively blocked by law. There was no doubt that, at the core (I suppose some <sup>might</sup> ~~would~~ say 'hard' core!) of the trouble, were the iniquitously harsh, ~~out~~-moded and, above all, unfair Obscene Publications Acts. Of course we were also aware that there were many other Acts or bits of Common 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, indeed they would have to, e.g. certain parts of cinema, postal, customs legislation, and so on.

In the 13 years since we were formed, whereas nearly all other Western World countries have effectively dispensed completely with our draconian, Obscene Publications Acts-type of 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, in the ~~next~~ session of Parliament, we are to have the Broadcasting Bill in which it is intended to extend the provisions of the Obscene Publications Acts to broadcasting and thereby to subject all broadcasters to state censorship via that measure 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 obsessed with censorship and we are thus effectively stifled by it.

Now it may be that you are saying to yourselves, that's as may be but why tell us? We're intelligent academics and we all, of course, deplore censorship. But do you? You see, what puzzles , and at times greatly angers me is that if there is such real opposition to censorship, why is there so little public outcry against it; and why, even when its innate 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. 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 ~~support~~ for the NCROPA's principles is concerned, I believe it is a lot 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. Let me cite just one classic example of this lunacy. Some years ago when private cinema clubs were not unlawful, as most now are, John Lindsay <sup>was</sup> a maker of sexually explicit films which were shown in several of his cinema clubs, in different areas of the country. He was constantly harassed by the police and faced a succession of prosecutions <sup>under the O.P. Act</sup>, always electing for jury trial. A batch of these films <sup>who</sup> were prosecuted - the same titles, the same films - five times, in five different courts throughout the country, including one Old Bailey trial. At the first four of these trials he was acquitted, including the Old Bailey case. At the fifth trial held at Preston Crown Court, the films were found guilty and he was sent to prison! Unlike the first four juries (although I think in one case he was acquitted by the magistrate before it proceeded further), the fifth jury decided, in their infinite wisdom, that his films were 'obscene'. The absurdity, let alone the injustice, of such terminology is blatantly apparent, and, in my opinion and the opinion of the NCROPA, should never be used in any legal statute. The absurdity is compounded in the case of the <sup>1959</sup> Obscene Publications Act, however, as you may know, by an attempt to define the indefinable - <sup>Obscene being defined</sup> - as that which tends to "deprave and corrupt", words which are no more capable of objective interpretation than <sup>is</sup> "obscene". 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 'respectable' people don't have anything to do with. It is this emotive response which is so played on by the Mary White-

houses of this country and which the continued existence of the whole concept of 'obscenity' in British law forcefully helps to perpetuate.

*Especially MPs.*

And therein lies, I believe, the NCROPA's main difficulty in getting more people, *and* including, ~~probably~~ <sup>maybe</sup> - and sadly - people like yourselves, to recognise that the only way forward in the battle against censorship, is the enactment of drastic reforms to our laws. And the elitist view that is often proffered, that it doesn't concern 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" - or even wish to see it", really isn't good enough either - not in a supposedly 'free' society. 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. *Again, quoting John Montague, in a free society we must allow both good and bad, the in different and the downright awful.*

We are also becoming increasingly conscious that some of our erstwhile fervent supporters, <sup>one</sup> 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-point, 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 once been afforded a single BBC television interview. Even planned participations or interviews <sup>promotions were recorded</sup> have, by one means or another, always been frustrated or sabotaged. More recently this 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 blow her nose and its given media saturation coverage! In fact, earlier on this year, the BBC "Breakfast Time" programme transmitted a National Viewers and Listeners' Association (Mary's organisation) promotional videotape - in other words a free commercial for them! - 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 as we know it! I should think that Hugh Carleton Greene turned in his grave! *\$ Attitude?*

We are, I have to say, extremely critical of ~~the~~ <sup>mgss</sup> 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 big-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 recently that "freedom of expression is a fundamental part of a free society" and was pontificating about how "We're way ahead of most other countries in our liberty, in our freedom, in our openness. They have to catch up with us." <sup>She had the effrontery to say that</sup> only ten days ago in that extraordinary interview on ITV with Brian Walden. But what colossal hypocrisy, what dishonesty with regard to 'censorship', and when, for the past ten years she has so ruthlessly presided over such flagrant repression of the media.

But our criticism extends beyond party lines. We are saddened and sometimes sickened by the increasingly authoritarian censorship measures being promulgated by opposition parties, Labour Party members in particular and, I regret to say, mostly by their women members. M.P. Clare Short's several attempts - and she promises another one - to introduce her Bill to make the display of naked or semi-naked pictures of women in newspapers illegal, in other words to 'censor' what goes into a newspaper - are alarming, and, in our opinion, do nothing to advance the worthy cause of women's rights and equal opportunities. Even more alarming was the Bill which another Labour MP, Dawn Primarolo recently tried to introduce - the "Location of Pornographic Material Bill".

Most worrying of all, however, are the frightening attempts by some feminist extremists to suppress sexual material involving women unless it strictly conforms to certain, specifically defined formats. What this amounts to is, of course, an attempt at 'thought control', a chillingly Orwellian prospect if ever I heard one. This is what is being proposed by a group, recently formed, which I mentioned earlier - the Campaign Against Pornography and Censorship - a ludicrously contradictory title, and also, of course, brazenly dishonest. To our horror, its main protagonist, an embittered 'misterogynistic feminist ~~by the name of~~ Catherine ~~Itzin~~, succeeded in getting herself elected to the Executive Committee of the National Council for Civil Liberties, to which we are also affiliated, and persuaded its A.G.M. to pass (albeit by a very narrow majority) a motion she had promoted which supported her extreme anti-libertarian views. That an organisation like the ~~NCC~~ should have allowed itself to be so duped when it proudly parades its own Charter of Civil Rights and Liberties which includes Article 7 - "Freedom of Speech and Publication" is deeply disturbing. Hopefully we shall be able to overturn that appalling decision at an early opportunity. Feminism is one thing, but Fascism - for that is what her proposals amount to - is quite another. We should always keep reminding ourselves, and I don't think its being over-emotive to mention it, that Hitler began his rise to power by banning and then burning books and ended up by burning people in the ovens at Auschwitz, Belsen and Dachau. I sincerely hope that <sup>none here</sup> [none of your members] will wish to follow her down that <sup>repressive</sup> road, however much you may disapprove of the way in which women are sometimes depicted in some public-



ations. Freedom of expression may not include the right to cause proven harm, but it does include the right to offend. It is sometimes a very good thing to offend - and often even necessary. That is a right nowadays often wrongly ~~rejected~~ <sup>disavowed</sup>.  
*in my view.*

But please don't get the <sup>for example</sup> idea that our opponents, the upholders of censorship, are all female. Far from it. Jack Straw, the Labour M.P. and Shadow Cabinet spokesman on Education, recently openly joined the Clare Short bandwagon and publicly said so in an extraordinary piece in "The Times" on 25th September. It was a piece entitled "Too soon to end these ages of innocence". He was actually complaining about a 'pop' record his nine year old son had listened to on BBC Radio 1, in which there was "a woman panting, then groaning, interspersed with the occasional mumbled phrase". It wasn't that his son had acquired any 'strange' or precocious ideas from the record. Merely that he was puzzled as to why so many people would buy such a record. Mr. Straw cited this mind-shattering incident and then <sup>other</sup> equally innocuous pursuits, as grounds for banning the availability of such material. It had never occurred to him, apparently, that he had the option - and right - of any responsible and concerned parent, to forbid his son from listening to BBC Radio 1, <sup>if he disapproved of it so much</sup> or simply to switch it off! This petty little incident provided him with the impetus and platform to build up to a blanket condemnation of "pornography" as being "unhealthy" and equally to condemn those who 'consume' "pornography" (by which I ~~mean~~ assume he meant sexually explicit material) as dangerous, perverts, degenerate and worthless.

*But*  
~~there~~, there is nothing "unhealthy" in an enthusiastic interest in sex and the pursuit thereof. It is a perfectly natural, instinctive human phenomenon. This is, <sup>surely</sup>, 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 (or films, videos, pictures etc) which are 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, sometimes violent sexual attacks on un-consenting victims by the inadequate or disturbed criminal. Apart from ~~these extreme manifestations of unacceptable anti-social behaviour~~ its potential use in preventing 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! Jack Straw 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 I'm very happy for him that that is so. But need he be 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? ~~Acceptance of such necessary~~ ~~such necessary sexual~~ substitute sexual activities in no way reflects what Jack Straw called "a perversion in the values of society", but rather an honest acknowledgement of human sexual appetite and the crucial need for its appeasement.

Finally, the removal of legal censorship restraints on sexually explicit material does not lead to an increase in sexual crime. There is absolutely no evidence to show that it does. Quite the reverse, as continental countries like Denmark, France and Holland have proved. And who knows, it might just reduce it!

Our campaign, the NCROPA, is not asking for the moon. It is simply demanding the fundamental right of all adults to choose for themselves what they see, read and hear. Most other civilised Western World countries have that right. We want it too.