

**SPOTLIGHT on a report that recommends 'Set the theatre free'**

By WILLIAM WOLFF and JAMES WILSON  
CENSORSHIP of plays by the Lord Chamberlain must be ended as soon as possible, a powerful committee of peers and MPs said yesterday.

And they urged that local councils and magistrates should also be stripped of their censorship powers over plays.

Ministers are expected to accept the committee's advice and to act on it in the next session of Parliament, which starts in the autumn.

The present Lord Chamberlain — 62-year-old Lord Cobbold — agrees that this part of his job, which his predecessors have done for more than 200 years, should be scrapped.

### Powers

He told the committee that he believed it was wrong that one man should have such wide powers—particularly when that man was head of the Queen's household.

And he said that it was also wrong that the stage should be treated differently

from the cinema, radio and television.

One of the Lord Chamberlain's duties is to ensure that no actor or actress impersonates the Queen or is rude about her on the stage.

Lord Cobbold said in a letter to the committee that he was worried about what

would happen about this in future.

But the committee—which included a former Lord Chamberlain, the Earl of Scarborough; the chairman of the Arts Council, Lord Goodman; actor-MP Andrew Faulds, and Michael Foot, MP—decided that nothing should be done.

The members said: "This is a matter which should be left

to the judgment and good taste of management and playwright—and, above all, to public opinion, which would not be likely to tolerate personal offensive references to the Sovereign or to her family in plays, any more than in a book or a newspaper."

### Banned

Lord Chamberlains have also banned the impersonation of, and offensive remarks about, Jesus Christ.

On this, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Michael Ramsey, told the committee:

"Now people's feelings on this subject cannot be protected by theatre censorship alone because of the freedom of the more popular media of television and cinema."

He said that he believed that to face unfamiliar "and temporarily distressing images of God is probably more help today than censorship."

The committee said it believed that this problem could be dealt with in future by the rarely-used law of blasphemy.

Members of the committee are certain that the end of theatre censorship will not allow actors and managers to "do just what they like."

They said they believed that managements would continue to refuse to put on certain plays, and that theatre critics would continue to describe plays as they wished.

### Control

The public would also be free to exercise control by refusing to attend theatres or by walking out.

Another safeguard would be the courts who administered the laws of libel and obscenity.

The committee said that most of the cuts made in plays by the Lord Chamberlain were

# CENSORED AT LAST...HER MAJESTY'S CENSOR

And all others who wield the blue pencil on plays



LORD COBBOLD . . .  
His censorship will end

Act to make sure that the stage was not used to poke fun at them.

The Lord Chamberlain became "licensor of theatres within the city and liberties of Westminster and wherever the Sovereign must reside."

But the powers of the present Lord Chamberlain really stem from the Theatres Act of 1843, which repealed the earlier law.

### Whim

Under the Act, two scripts of a play have to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain. His powers are such that he can cut or ban at whim—but in modern times the powers have been used moderately.

For more than 100 years campaigns have attempted to end the Lord Chamberlain's censorship. But they have always failed . . . until now.

necessary because of obscenity.

The members believed that obscenity could be stopped in future if the House of Commons introduced higher penalties.

Censorship of plays goes back to the days of jovial King Henry the Eighth who liked a good laugh—as long as it was not directed at him.

His court had a "Master of Revels" who kept a close watch on the jests which were set before the king.

Later, during Cromwell's rule, the jesting stopped altogether when he closed the theatres.

Parliament made the Lord Chamberlain the theatre censor in 1737.

Politicians passed an