

Letters to the Editor

Tuning in to a broadcasting attack

HUGO YOUNG'S perceptive column (Commentary, April 26) was remarkably timely, allowing us to get in perspective the Government's attempt to take off television the This Week programme Murder On The Rock. We do indeed have "the state as governess, as eavesdropper, as control . . ."

The IBA is to be congratulated on the decision to stand firm. Showing the programme has nothing to do with the well-rehearsed government phrase by Tom King and Geoffrey Howe of "trial by television." The programme was balanced and well researched, and raised issues of public interest. It needed to be shown.

However, the Government, judging from the response so far, is avoiding the content of the programme and going for

the jugular by attacking the IBA for daring to stand firm against high-level government pressure to take off the programme. It is in this context that Hugo Young's warning about the Broadcasting Standards Council's widening future role needs greater publicity. If the remit of the BSC will be to prevent and pre-censor programmes, we face a very serious situation.

The BSC will become the spearhead for the attack by the Government on the concept of a regulated but reasonably independent public service broadcasting system. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has argued against government actions in the past to curtail and control documentary programmes such as Real Lives or uncomfortable investigations such as The Secret Soci-

ety series. (Incidentally, two of the programmes still haven't been shown: Zircon and one on cabinet government).

It was Macaulay, in the oft-quoted phrase about "the fourth estate of the realm", who made the connection between the press, liberty and the extension of political democracy. I think this latest action by the Government is a major and dangerous attempt to curtail one important aspect of professional, responsible broadcasting and needs to be resisted as effectively as possible.

Granville Williams,
Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom,
Corn Exchange Building,
Manchester.

HUGO YOUNG is clearly being true to his gentlemanly instincts in lampooning

government proposals on the Broadcasting Standards Council, which will supposedly pre-censor BBC and IBA programmes before transmission.

Like all authoritarian administrations any time, anywhere, this Government cannot wait to get its hands on the knobs and buttons of the TV and radio stations, in order to effect direct control of the media.

In this way it is behaving exactly like "conviction politicians" the whole world over — Castro, Peron, the Islamic guards, and so on, have all done exactly the same ever since radio and TV were invented.

This is surely a proud tradition which we are happy to uphold in this country.

T. A. Stratton,
62 Tarbolton Crescent,
Altrincham,
Cheshire.

Fundamental points behind P&O efforts to tidy the decks

THERE is a risk that the fundamental reasons for the ferry problems at Dover get lost in the rhetoric of the dispute. P&O is not trying to destroy the NUS, nor is it trying to lower safety standards. All our actions are about achieving a ferry business that has a long-term viable future for our shareholders, our workforce and our customers.

1. P&O European Ferries, Dover, earns less than 10 per cent return on capital employed — insufficient to refurbish, let alone replace, the ships or sustain jobs in the future.

2. That is the reason for seeking immediate cost reductions. These have already been achieved with shore staff and ships' officers. The only way to produce cost savings with the seafaring workforce is, by changing very outdated work practices and reducing manning levels — significantly higher than our foreign competitors.

3. 1992 market equalisation and the advent of the Channel Tunnel are future challenges — Stage 2.

4. The company agreed to Acas conciliation and agreed to an Acas-proposed solution. This was rejected by the union.

5. At no time has the union made any clearly defined proposal to achieve cost savings, nor has it accepted the need for immediate change. The present Red Book terms were put direct to the seafarers. Over 65 per cent accepted them. It has never been put to the men by their union.

6. Safety: All operational procedures and work rosters have been discussed with and approved by the fleet's senior masters; ships will sail only with experienced seamen; ships will sail only after a detailed inspection by Department of Transport surveyors into ships' readiness, training standards, and properly certificated crew.

Safety for any P&O company could not and would not be a subject for negotiation.

7. The company must introduce cost-effective and efficient working practices if it is to succeed against relentless foreign competition. This is an immediate and urgent need and one that was not dealt with realistically by the Dover company's previous management.

8. As a group, P&O works constructively with many unions.

We believe this could have been the case with the NUS and still could be.

9. P&O is the only remaining British-owned ferry company operating between the UK and the Continent. We employ more British seafarers than any other company. If the union acknowledges the wishes of its membership, we can keep it that way.

Sir Jeffrey Sterling,
Chairman,
Peninsular and Oriental
Steam Navigation Co.,
79 Pall Mall,
London SW 1.

FOR THOSE who don't take a very close interest in political or industrial affairs, it is difficult at the best of times to disentangle conflicting perceptions of the truth, but when the broadcasting media come down on one side it makes the situation impossibly confused.

In the case of the dispute involving the National Union of Seamen, their members and P&O Ferries, the bias against the workers by the BBC in particular has reached unacceptable proportions.

The failure to raise seriously the issue of safety — something which the media spent a lot of time on when the Herald of Free Enterprise capsized — could be construed as a dereliction of their duty to the public.

Failure to spell out the new conditions under which seamen are supposed to work must stem from ignorance, as no one could fail to be horrified at what is expected of the men involved. An 18-hour day on a regular basis, for as long as four weeks with the turn-around time in port for short crossings actually being counted in the six hours available for sleep, takes us back to the 19th century.

No one would dispute, and the NUS certainly does not, that change is necessary to face the future competition from the Channel Tunnel and save both jobs and the industry. Doing this by imposing such conditions that we exploit our fellow human beings beyond anything we would tolerate ourselves, is a matter for the widest public concern and not just those involved in the dispute.

David Blunkett,
(Lab. Sheffield Brightside),
House of Commons.

Bigotry colour Hurdles too high for jumping an unrealistic queue

THERE IS much more to the William and Mary tercentenary celebrations than John Samuel and the Guardian (April 26) acknowledge. The Orange Order, Northern Ireland's oldest sectarian organisation (for whom William of Orange is the most powerful symbol and rallying point), has already joined forces with the National Front in order to turn the "celebrations" in Exeter and Chesterfield to political advantage. This ill-conceived tourist project will become the focus not only for a mass protest against the Anglo-Irish agreement but a ready-made publicity platform for vicious anti-Catholic prejudice and racist bigotry.

Tony Benn (MP),
Jeremy Corbyn (MP),
Alice Mahon (MP),
Bernie Grant (MP),
Ken Livingstone (MP),
Harry Cohen (MP),
John Hughes (MP),
Bob Clay (MP),
Pat Wall (MP),
Audrey Wise (MP),
Anti-Fascist Action.

CATHOLIC resistance to William did not collapse at the Boyne (Guardian, April 26). Limerick successfully withstood a Williamite siege in 1690 and only surrendered on "honourable terms" after a second siege in 1691. It was this latter, event which marked the end of organised resistance.

B. J. Hodkinson,
Limerick, Eire.

HAS the Guardian become a co-habitee of the Government's unreality capsule? Your coverage of the London Research Centre's estimate of 27,000 "unauthorised tenants" in London (April 25) appeared under the heading "Queue jumping takes on a new shape in London". There is nothing new about the surreptitious handing-over of council tenancies in London or elsewhere. Indeed, the practice was substantially restricted by features of the housing benefit system introduced in 1982/3 and has probably declined since then.

Neither is there any meaningful "queue" to be jumped. To be on the waiting list of a London borough is about as profitable as waiting for a train at Dalston Junction — the service no longer exists. Access to public sector housing is nowadays restricted to people in "priority categories" under the Housing

Act, and the essence of that system is that there is no queueing. The council must accept immediate responsibility.

"Queue jumping" is a concept useful to those with an interest in deceiving the public into believing there is still something to queue for, whilst marginalising and denigrating those homeless people in most urgent need who have no alternative but to take matters into their own hands.

To describe unofficial tenancy hand-overs as a "black market" distorts reality, as well as being racially loaded. Whilst some departing tenants may exploit the situation financially, this is not the general rule. It is more common for keys to be handed over without charge, sometimes to virtual strangers. The tenants' concern is more likely to be to ensure that their former home continues to be a home for someone else, rather

than yet another vandalised "void" which, in many areas, will be the almost inevitable result if it falls into the hands of the council. This is equally probable in Conservative or SLD controlled boroughs as in Labour ones.

Any distinction from squatting (i.e. entering premises as a trespasser and remaining as such) is valid only as a legal abstraction. In real life, as well as the daily practice of the courts, the position is more complex and several shades of grey exist between the two. These nuances are, anyway, lost on the councils concerned who invariably describe and treat such people as "squatters" or — quite wrongly — "illegal occupiers."

Certainly, the work of this squatting organisation, as well as others, involves advising and supporting people who originally entered their homes, through the agency of existing or former tenants in roughly equal proportion to those who used other means.

None of this will astonish many people who live on council estates, let alone anyone who is homeless. However, one of the alarming features of London's exploding housing crisis is that it is so dimly and inaccurately perceived by the (subsidised) mortgageable majority.

Jim Paton,
Advisory Service for Squatters,
2 St Paul's Road,
London N 1.

Put that in your poll-tax pipe and smoke it

AMIDST ALL the noise about social security, it seems that nobody has spotted the poll tax implications. If you have got up to £8,000 you are going to be fractionally better off. But those claimants living on Brixton's Stockwell Park Estate will not benefit by a penny. They are the people for whom saving is a pipe dream.

The riddle, for me, is will the Government really try to operate the poll tax rebate with the same mix of Poor Law mentality and patchwork politics? If so, stand by for a further cut in welfare entitlement as the current entitlement to one-fifth average rates (the much vaunted £1.30 per week) is reduced to one-fifth average poll tax (86p per week).

When will people wake up to the fact that this same mean

social security system will form the rebate system of the poll tax, which is much more hard hitting, especially in the inner London boroughs. How can hard-pressed families, already acknowledged as losing out, be expected to pay one fifth of £547 (Lambeth's poll tax) when their benefit is only being increased by 86p per week (the average poll tax)?

If it is accepted that these families must lose £2.50 before any help is given to them, to what destitution will we drive them under the poll tax? We still have no indication from the Government whether it is going to pay poll tax rebate according to the number of adults in the household, rather than as under the present system per household.

What sort of concession will

quell the disquiet when poll tax arrives?

Dave Morgan
Deputy Leader and
Chair of Finance,
Lambeth Council.

WHEN A rich person and a poor person go to prison they suffer equally for a given offence. But if they escape imprisonment by a hair's breadth, the poorer may suffer a great deal more than the richer. This is not equality before the law in any meaningful sense; a fine should cause all people an equal degree of hardship. We have so taken this way of doing things for granted that it is worth drawing attention to it while the fairness or otherwise of the poll tax is being debated.

(Dr) **K. A. Hassall,**
Reading University.

Miscellany

FIRST WE hear of a lottery to provide extra funding for the health services, then we hear of sponsored operations.

Assuming we ignore any moral or ethical problems with either of these "innovations", can we expect to see in the future lotteries offering kidney dialysis as first prize and hip replacement as second prize? This would certainly overcome the problem of selecting patients for such "charitable" enterprises as sponsored operations.

Christopher Wibbeley,
Urmston, Manchester.

I AM not surprised that British weathermen have such a bad reputation. Your "Around Europe" weather report (Guardian, April 25) shows that they are working under the impression that New York and Los Angeles are major European cities while Madrid and Lisbon are not. As the accompanying map points out, Europe ends at the Pyrenees. Or does the EEC now extend to Africa?

J. A. Romero Sánchez,
Madrid, Spain.

I MUST TELL my French son-in-law to forget the usual three kisses when he comes to England — a bit of luxury at 3 x £40 ("Cost of a kiss," Guardian, April 26).

Robert Brennan,
Corby.

A case for fair treatment

MARTIN CAIN (Letters, April 25) draws attention, rightly, to the important contribution which has been made since 1945 to the work of our hospitals — that of the operating department assistants.

Until quite recently they were paid at a rate comparable with that of theatre porters despite having to undergo a two-year course of in-service training and to pass a City and

Guilds examination. In the hospital hierarchy they are usually regarded as of similar status to that of state enrolled nurses. Let us hope they will presently be given an increase comparable to that of their nursing colleagues.

A. R. Hunter,
Professor Emeritus,
Department of Anaesthesia,
Royal Infirmary,
Manchester.

A Country Diary

KESWICK: Just for once I am writing a diary about very ordinary things and simply for my own pleasure — so anyone who wants to do so can stop reading now. There is, however, a reason for such self-indulgence. This has been the first April for three years which has had the true feeling of spring. The change began almost unnoticed with only a gentle day-warmth along the valleys. The nights have still been cold. The wood pigeons are incubating eggs in a tall thorn tree here and the spare one dozes on a well-leaved birch branch dropping "whitewash" and small feathers to the grass below, where the greenfinches collect them to carry away as white moustaches for their nests up the slope. I have never seen the primrose clumps so full of

bloom along the valley road or in the woodlands beyond. I go each spring to visit a plant of green alkanet, fearful for its safety, and this year found a far bigger spread of it whose white-eyed, brilliant blue faces turned proudly to the sun. Nearly all the fell lambs are born now — a lively crop. No valley is silent for long; their small demanding voices and their mothers' deeper replies echo everywhere. Yes, these are all ordinary things but not to me, not this April. I lost the sight of my right eye, overnight, some weeks ago and now I am learning, thankfully, the truth of the old saying that half a loaf is better than no bread. I am certainly enjoying my "half" now with the moon almost directly above this hill and owls calling.

ENID J. WILSON

Rallying recruits for the relief agency cause

VICTORIA BRITAIN'S excellent report (Guardian, April 29) on Oxfam's "logistical nightmare" in Sudan, where it is trying to organise convoys of lorries to rescue thousands of people from otherwise certain death, calls to mind yet again the role which a small troop of our own forces could play in this situation.

Such units have frequently been invited to the Sudan since independence, and relish humanitarian tasks. When I recently asked a senior official in the Ministry of Defence what response he would expect if he called for volunteers for the similar nightmare of Mozambique, where Oxfam says there is a desperate need for military

escort vehicles, he replied instantly: "Half the Armed Forces would volunteer."

I thought the Government should know.
Hugh Hanning,
Chairman,
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