

NOTE OF A MEETING HELD ON 11 SEPTEMBER 1979

WELSH LANGUAGE BROADCASTING

Present: Home Secretary Mr. Wyn Roberts (Minister of State
Welsh Office)

4 OFFICIALS PRESENT

Mr. Roberts had requested a meeting with the Home Secretary to discuss Welsh language aspects of Government policy on the fourth channel in advance of the Home Secretary's speech to the Royal Television Society. He was particularly concerned that the present proposals differed markedly from those contained in the Conservative Party's Welsh election manifesto. Once they became known there would undoubtedly be an outcry in Wales.

TIMING

2. Priority had in the past been given to the introduction of the fourth channel in Wales and it was important that the Welsh language service should not lag behind the introduction of the general service elsewhere. In discussion, it was pointed out that the present Government's commitment was to the simultaneous introduction of the service: priority could not be given to Wales. There was already a reference in the Home Secretary's speech to the fact that the fourth channel could not start until a substantial proportion of the population throughout the country could receive the broadcasts. The Home Secretary agreed that this part of his speech could be expanded to explain the importance of adequate coverage in Wales, particularly in the northern part, where the majority of Welsh language speakers were concentrate

BALANCE BETWEEN THE BBC AND THE IBA

3. The Conservative Party's Welsh election manifesto had promised that all Welsh language programmes would be concentrated on one channel. There had in the past been criticism from English speakers in Wales of the use of BBC 1 for Welsh language programmes. Mr. Roberts was therefore concerned that if they were now to be shown on BBC and the fourth channel, the BBC should be encouraged to concentrate them on BBC 2. Although the Home Secretary could not direct the BBC, he assured Mr. Roberts that they would without doubt comply with the request to restrict Welsh language broadcasts to BBC 2.

4. Although the present proposals meant that there would not be a complete Welsh language service, the Home Secretary pointed out that Welsh speakers would in fact get a better service since the competition between the two channels would ensure better quality. There would also have been difficulty in attracting advertisers if it had been decided that the fourth channel should be the sole vehicle for Welsh language programmes. Mr. Roberts accepted these points, but asked that the reference in the Home Secretary's speech to the Home Office Working Party should be deleted since this might unnecessarily draw attention to the difference between the Government's present proposals and those in its manifesto: it was agreed that this reference should be deleted.

CONSULTATIVE MACHINERY

5. The Government proposed that a consultative body should be set up to ensure that Welsh language programmes on the two channels should not overlap. Mr. Roberts felt that a body of some strength would be needed for this purpose, drawing from the BBC, the IBA and independent producers, and argued that it should be a statutory body which might also be given responsibility for programme quality. The Home Secretary was anxious to avoid setting up any body which might resemble a Quango but agreed that a general requirement to set up consultative machinery could be written into the Bill. It would, however, be extremely difficult to give such a body responsibility for programme quality since this would interfere with the editorial independence of the IBA and BBC. Mr. Roberts accepted this point.

6. There was some discussion of the possibility of introducing a statutory minimum limit on the number of hours to be devoted to Welsh language broadcasts (at present expected to be about 22 hours). Mr. Roberts accepted, however, that the introduction of such a minimum limit might be counter-productive in leading to inflexibility. The meeting concluded.

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Private Office
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