

Jeremy Isaacs assesses the success of the Fourth Channel and looks at the impact it has had on the broadcasting network.

Channel 4: The First Nine Months

INTERVIEW WITH JEREMY ISAACS

by Stuart Hood

I'd like to start by asking you whether you think the Fourth Channel was actually necessary? After all we had three television channels already and it might be argued that given that amount of broadcasting time the BBC could have done more innovatory broadcasting as you are required to do?

Well I certainly think that the BBC could have done a little more than they have done in the way of innovatory broadcasting. But I think it's also true that what broadcasting now bids to do is to satisfy a very great many needs that arise in a society. However, there were needs that were not being met with the three channels that preceded us and I think there was a case for a fourth channel and a case for using it for particular purposes. What I don't think is that there is any case at all for having a fourth channel if it was only going to do entirely the same sort of thing as the others.

The three channels that we had before you arrived on the scene were committed to consensual broadcasting. Would you say that Channel Four is an attempt to do something other than consensual broadcasting?

I think there is a danger of over simplifying this argument about what consensual broadcasting is. The fact is that you can use a consensual broadcasting system as widely and imaginatively as you choose to. In this country the broadcasting institutions are very close to the centre of society. By this I mean both the centre of society in terms of an audience which you need to reach, and also in terms of the social institutions that are powerful (and these include government). As a result of this closeness and of the cautions and inhibitions that govern politically-sensitive broadcasting institutions, I think that the totality of broadcasting has been far less adventurous than it might have been in portraying new ideas, in giving vent to new voices, in listening to particular groupings in society. I am thinking of young people, I think always of working class people, I think of Black Britons. I think that less space was made for those claims on our attention than should have been made and therefore those things (among others) are things that I thought Channel Four could attempt to offer.

I think it's wrong, though, to write off all broadcasting put out on to the television channels by the institutes that preceded Channel Four as a grey mass, because within the different broadcasting organisations there were attempts to make particular kinds of programmes that intend saying something and therefore risk saying something that carries with it a particular point of view and is based on a particular analysis.

And would you say that the legislation in the Television Act (1981) which set you up, gave you a franchise to do that?

I think that Channel Four's franchise to offer the sort of



broadcasting that it is doing derives from years of debate preceding the Act about broadcasting in this country. In most respects the Act was helpful in prescribing, in a very general way, the sorts of things that a channel that tried to be different and distinctive could and should come up with. It was then pretty permissive about precisely what those strands of programmes can and should be. I think that the Independent Broadcasting Authority in consultation with the Board of Channel Four, in their very important programme policy statement, made some of those requirements more explicit. That is the document, for example, which charges the channel to cater for ethnic minorities in this country. Therefore I regard the Act as an excellent foundation on which to offer the mix of programmes that Channel Four does purvey.

I think it would have been extremely difficult for Parliament to write a more specific Act and it probably wouldn't have been any more helpful. But I do not doubt that the Act is open to different potential interpretations and I suspect that different MPs on different sides of the House of Commons read different purposes

into the final wording of the Act; some might wish to see it used to justify a different sort of television programming from what is currently available. To be specific I think that the charge to cater for interests not catered for by ITV was seen, perfectly understandably by some Conservatives as a charge simply to be more specific in catering for a range of consumer satisfactions: the notion that there should be a gardening programme, a motoring programme, a stamp-collecting programme etc. But I don't myself feel that such a view was sufficiently alive to the needs of this society or to the potential of broadcasting for this to be the totality of the extent by which we should increase the ambit of broadcasting on the Fourth Channel.

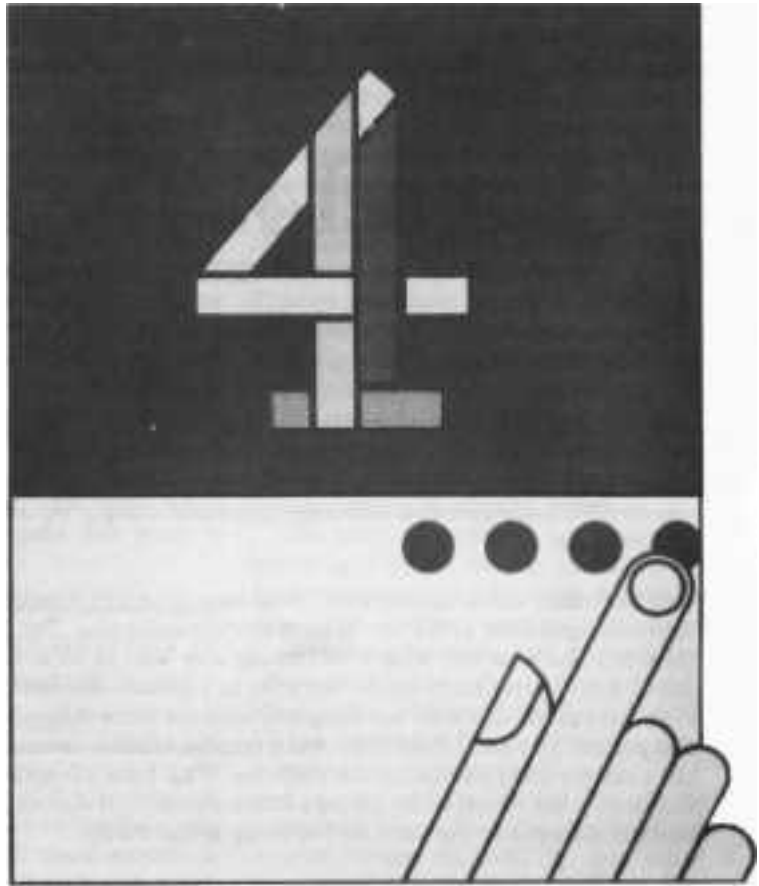
What is the actual structure of Channel Four? You depend obviously on the IBA which is the ultimate controlling body and mediates between you and the government . . . ?

The IBA set up a Board, and they set up a company to supply them with programmes since they take the view that they are not themselves programme-makers or programme-suppliers, and therefore they gave that Board responsibility for the policy of the company. The Board delegates some of its powers, not by any means all of them, to myself as Chief Executive of the company. I and my team of colleagues (whom we call Commissioning Editors) have tried to act as a sort of two-way filter between ourselves and the potential programme-contributing-community outside. We do not make our programmes and one of our best hopes of achieving variety is to keep taking material from different groups of producers outside. We both listen and try to assess what it is that people are trying to offer to us — try to tell them what it is we are looking for. We have worked out by some sort of dialogue between us a mix of programmes which I have felt able to recommend to the Board — a mix of programmes which would both meet our qualitative obligations and somehow enable us to reach a sizeable enough share of audience to sustain the financial viability of the system.

There were specific requirements in my mind that needed to be satisfied, if we were to be true to our remit, and if we were going to get on the air a schedule of programmes with punch and spice. So we set ourselves to have programmes from the Black and Asian community, we set ourselves to have programmes that would make use of the work of independent film and video workshops, and indeed we committed ourselves to funding film and video workshops. This was in answer to the great cultural case which had been made over the years by the Independent Film-makers Association. We set ourselves to have a programme that would be critical of, or at least alternative to, conventional television news. We set ourselves to have foreign input on the Channel — and not simply material from Hollywood. We set ourselves to have programmes whose sole object would be to convey a range of critical opinions on various important matters.

Could we now look at your finances. The Channel carries commercial advertising but that revenue doesn't go directly to you but to the ITV companies. You are funded in fact by large subscriptions from the individual commercial TV companies. To what extent does this make you dependent on their good grace?

I don't think it makes us dependent on their good grace. It certainly means that it becomes important and sensible for us to have good relations with them. The essence of the matter, however, is this: as opposed to our competing directly with them for advertising revenue and, more importantly, to competing directly



the BBC could have done a little more than they have done in the way of innovatory broadcasting

against them for the sort of advertising revenue they most easily attract (which is the factor which determines most powerfully the nature and scope of American network television and also Australian commercial television) they retain their monopoly of television advertising revenue in this country, with the single exception of London where Thames and LWT compete for their share of revenue.

The ITV companies hold monopolies and public monopolies; the political parties have up to now consistently taken the point of view that to have direct competition for advertising revenue in British broadcasting would result in a lowering of programme standards. Now because they have a monopoly of revenue it gives them at least the chance of selling time to one sort of advertiser on one sort of channel which purveys mostly a particular sort of programme, and of appealing to another sort of advertiser on a channel which is purveying a range of other programmes some of which may only appeal to small, selective, intelligent, thinking audiences. The further key factor is this: that the subscription which the ITV companies pay to fund Channel Four is based not on the revenue from Channel Four but on a proportion of the total advertising revenue they take from their public monopoly across two channels. The intention of the IBA when this system was brought into being was that Channel Four should not be absolutely dependent for its fundings upon advertising revenue but that it should instead have a claim on the very large revenues accruing to an extremely profitable public monopoly. This would enable us to

pursue our cultural purposes, to a very considerable extent protected from the harsh pressures of the market.

The advertising on your channel is really aimed at the As, Bs and Cs perhaps — a young audience with quite a lot of money to spend. This doesn't stop the companies complaining however. When the balance sheets come out they complain that they have got to give this money to Channel Four.

That is correct. It has not stopped the companies complaining. Company chairmen particularly tend to do so when they are showing why their profits are less than they otherwise might have been and I could wish that ITV company chairmen would choose their words with greater care. The managing directors of the ITV companies on the other hand, do seem to me to be very strongly committed to making the system work. Certainly we have excellent relations with them. But behind the whole of this there lies a much more serious question which will not easily go away and that is the pressure from the five biggest advertisers in the country who never wanted the ITV companies to retain a monopoly of television advertising revenue and bitterly resent the fact that, successful as they may be in controlling their costs in all sorts of other areas by efficient methods or by holding down wages, they are totally unable to control their costs in marketing, because they are always asked to pay substantially more by the forces of the market for the advertising they need to sell their brands.

What they've always wanted to see (and this is the point which a new government would be faced with pressure for) is the ITV monopoly of sales television advertising broken. But they want to see it broken, not by competition for a different sort of advertising offering a different range, a wider range, of programmes, they want to see it broken in the way in which it was broken in the United States by the emergence of another mass appeal advertising medium. This would split the total advertising revenue available with ITV thus bringing down the unit cost. Either they have not yet appreciated that Channel Four, if it is to fulfill its remit, cannot possibly be that other mass advertising medium or else it is not Channel Four that they have in their sights but BBC1.

Which they would want to change into a commercial channel?

I think if you asked those five large advertisers they would confirm that I have correctly guessed what they want. I think that the large and interesting debates about broadcasting in this country over the next five years will be about Channel Four's fulfillment of its remit and its commercial viability, and questions about the funding of broadcasting generally as media proliferate and the call for market solutions perhaps becomes stronger.

But if the present administration is returned would you feel that you were under threat in any way?

I don't feel that we should be under threat but I think that there will be a critical scrutiny of what the broadcasting institutions are doing; how they are fulfilling society's needs; how they are funded; the viability of the funding arrangements. I think that we must expect a new Home Secretary to take a look at the broadcasting scene and form views. I think the most critical financial question is going to be whether the BBC's venture into direct broadcasting by satellite is something they can possibly afford. The licence fee that the BBC was awarded over-estimated the degree of inflation it would have to cope with and therefore, they may ask that the present figure last for longer than the BBC had hoped.

New Soviet Booklets **YOU WON'T WANT TO MISS**

Well-produced paperbacks on a wide variety of themes.

- 1. **Socialism: Theory and Practice (STP) No. 3, 1983**
Yuri Andropov: Major guidelines of Soviet policy.
F. Konstantinov: Marxism and our time (50p)
- 2. STP No. 4, 1983 **A. Yegorov:** Leninism and the world revolutionary movement. **O. Sayenko:** What a rouble can buy (50p)
- 3. STP No. 5, 1983 **B. Ponomarev:** What is existing Socialism? **I. Mintz:** Internationalism, traditions & the present day (50p)
- 4. **Yuri Andropov:** the teachings of Marx and the building of Socialism in the USSR (25p)
- 5. Americans write to Yuri Andropov — "Do everything to safeguard Peace" (25p)
- 6. Soviet Union Proposes — Soviet peace initiatives (40p)
- 7. Novosti Year Book 1983 (85p)
- 8. By the will of the Peoples (40p)
- 9. Constitution of the USSR (50p)
- 10. Illustrated History of the USSR (70p)
- 11. How the Revolution was won (35p)
- 12. Power Industry (50p)
- 13. For the good of Man — Comecon Economics (30p)
- 14. Lenin — Karl Marx: Frederick Engels (40p)
- 15. Lenin — Karl Marx and his Teaching (40p)
- 16. Lenin on Socialist Economy (50p)
- 17. How would disarmament affect each of us (30p)
- 18. People should know the truth (20p)
- 19. A Story about Soviet Women (40p)
- 20. Stop the spread of nuclear weapons (20p)
- 21. If there is no first nuclear strike (20p)
- 22. All nuclear tests must be banned (20p)
- 23. Peace, dear to the heart ((30p)
- 24. The world shall not be blown up (20p)
- 25. Arms control — disarmament (20p)
- 26. Disarmament — the main Soviet Proposals (30p)
- 27. Andrei Gromyko: Press Conference (25p)
- 28. The Legal Status of foreign citizens in the USSR (40p)
- 29. Afganistan in pictures (50p)
- 30. Glimpses of Lenin (40p)
- 31. Under the cover of Inter-American Solidarity (30p)
- 32. The Soviet Union; Facts, Problems, Appraisals (45p)
- 33. Political Terms — A short guide (40p)
- 34. For the Benefit of Man — For the Sake of Peace on Earth (25p)
- 35. Stop the Death Cloud — Chemical Weapons (15p)
- 36. Working versus Talking Democracy (40p)
- 37. Places Dear to the Heart (30p)

**To: Soviet Booklets (M.T.D.),
3 Rosary Gardens, London SW7 4NW.
Please send me paperbacks as ticked. I enclose
£.....PO/Cheque. Block Letters Please**

Name

Address

CENTRAL BOOKS

Tel 242 6166
37 Grays Inn Road, London WC1.



HOW WE WON THE VOTE, BUT LOST THE ELECTION

A selection of books and postcards on Chartism and Women's Suffrage

From Chartism to Labourism by Theodore Rothstein Paper £6.95 with a new introduction by John Saville

A reprint of the earliest major Marxist history of British working class politics.

History of the Chartist Movement
R C Gammage Paper £3.60

First published in 1854 at the end of the Chartist upsurge. Written by an active participant in the movement.

The Chartist Experience Edited by James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson Paper £6.95

Studies in working-class radicalism and culture 1830-1860. A recent collection of essays on Chartism (published 1982) including pieces by the editors, Gareth Stedman-Jones, Eileen Yeo and others.

London Chartism 1838-1848 David Goodway
Hardback £22.50

Published in 1982, the book about Chartism in London.

The Suffragette Movement Sylvia Pankhurst
Paper £4.95

The history of how women won the vote.

One Hand Tied Behind Us Jill Liddington and Jill Norris Paper £3.95

The rise of the women's suffrage movement with special reference to the north of England.

POSTCARDS

2 sets available

Women's Suffrage (6 cards) £1 set
Chartism Series (6 cards) £1 set

when ordering by post add 15% to cover the cost of post and packing.

Two criticisms are sometimes voiced about Channel Four: one is that of 'ghetto-isation', the other is aimed at an element of 'amateurism' in the productions.

I was totally taken aback by the argument that because one caters for particular communities one is wishing to confine them to a ghetto when what one has been trying to do is almost precisely the opposite, to take people who have felt themselves being in a ghetto with no outlet to communicate to the rest of the world and no ability to take pride in having access to a national medium of their own, and allow them access to it. I think that there is an insularity in British thinking. In some ways I feel this to be a very tolerant society but in other ways I feel that for some members of society

the Channel has been perceived to be biased to the Left

it's only tolerant of those who are *of us*, and wish to be exactly as we are and that it isn't tolerant of the difference between cultural groups. I'm absolutely sure (whether Brixton and Toxteth had been burning or not) that it was necessary to let people talk about their own experience in programmes which made a particular point of allowing that to happen. I also think that the number of Irish, Cypriots and Jews in this country requires that eventually there be some recognition in mass media, not just of their ordinariness and equality, but also of their cultural heritage and distinctiveness.

If you have a current affairs programme which looks at the world from the point of view of the black community I think it may be true to say that it doesn't act in any way as ameliorating, or as a persuasive factor on some white people to listen to their case more

UNA International Service



SITUATIONS VACANT in the THIRD WORLD

Upper Volta: Field Officer; Agriculturalist. Mali: Hygienists; Survey Coordinator; Community Worker; Radio Programmer; Radio Maintenance Technician. West Bank: Occupational Therapist, Medical Laboratory Technician; Water and Soil Engineer; Social Statistician. Other posts in Madagascar, Cape Verde and Brazil.

Serve for two years on a basic salary plus all costs, including return fares, language tuition etc. Details from UNA International Service, 3 Whitehall Ct, London SW1, quoting MA/2 and specifying post.

UNAIS is part of the work of the UNA trust
Registered Charity Number 256236

heretic books PO Box 247, London N15 6RW
£3.95 add 10% for mail order

NUCLEAR-FREE DEFENCE

A symposium with contributions by

Ronald Higgins	Stephen Maxwell	Pat Arron-smith
Frank Ailson MP	John Skiers	Joan Maynard MP
Mary Kaldor	Stuart Christie	Meg Beresford
Brian Bunter	Ruth Wallgrove	Robert Fryer
Lisa Foley	Dalydd Elis Thomas MP	Ann Pettifor
David Widgery	David Selbourne	Chris Saxony
April Carter	Carole Harwood	David Taylor
Peter Tatchell		Jonathan Platts

sympathetically. Perhaps it doesn't have that effect. Perhaps it doesn't convert. But it does at least give people a sense that they do have something to say and that something is received by others.

What about the 'amateurism'?

I think that in some cases it is unfair and unjustified. Amateurish, in a way, has almost exactly the wrong connotations for the sort of work I am thinking about. I'm thinking about letting new working class voices through on to television without expecting them automatically to use the codes of language and practice that are developed and smoothed and fine honed inside years of broadcasting institutions. Institutions which too rarely ask

direct competition for advertising revenue. . .
would result in a lowering of
programme standards

themselves if they are doing things in exactly the right way — why they go on doing things in one way when it may be possible to do them as effectively in all sorts of different ways.

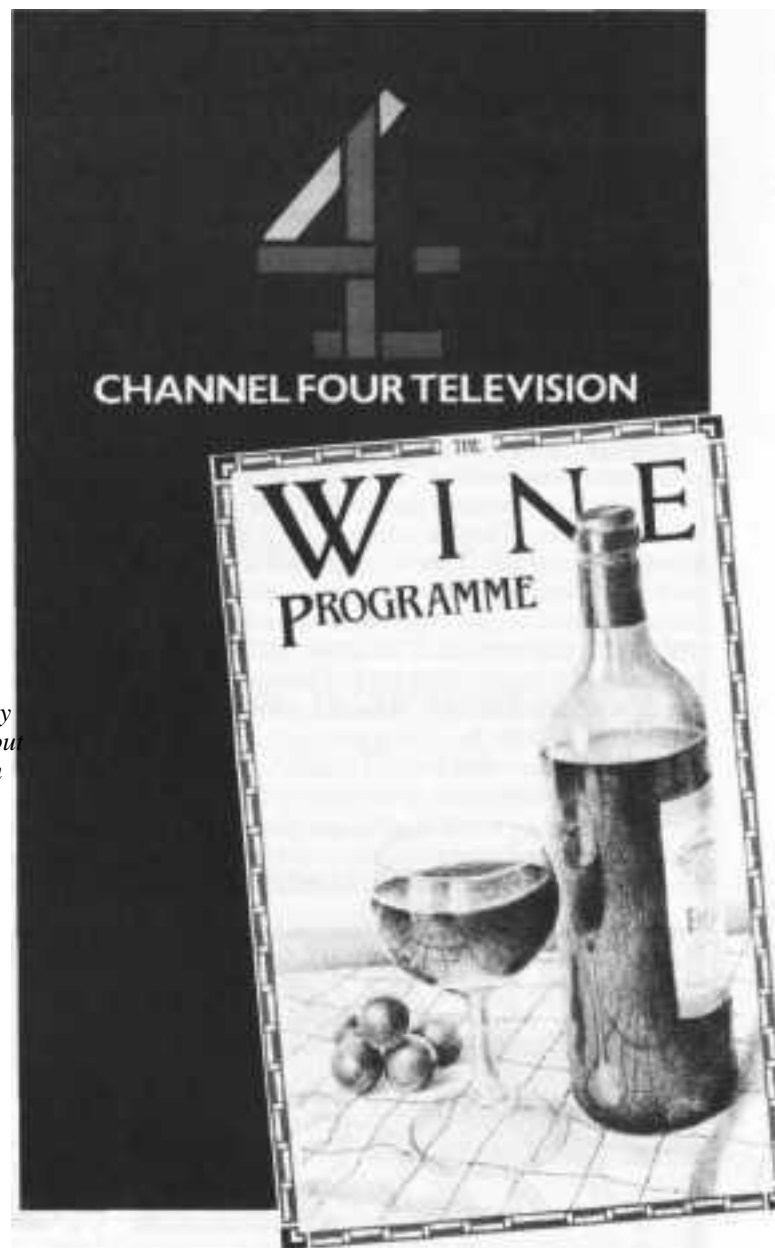
You mentioned the opportunities given to independent film makers by Channel Four. You recently made a rather depressing statement about the fact that they would be very much cut back in the next year, which caused some alarm and despondency in their ranks. You seemed to suggest that that is an inevitable process.

It isn't depressing in the sense that you intend because there is no question whatever of cutting back the volume of programmes which independents will contribute to the screen, to Channel Four. A high proportion of our funds, at least 50% of our funds, will go towards independents. What is proving extremely difficult and intractable, and was always likely to do so, is to spread those funds in such a way as to sustain in business the more than 150 independent production companies with whom the channel has had contracts in our first year of operation. I'm hoping that independent producers of merit and substance will engage in a series of voluntary amalgamations so that people can share their overheads. But I would very much like to maintain the notion that we are open to suggestions and we are open to the new fellow or the new group of people coming to knock on the door. It will not be easy to proceed in exactly the way we had proceeded which was literally to say: if you want to make programmes for Channel Four please send your ideas to us and they will be considered. We are going to have to try and find an accommodation between the need to be efficient in processing suggestions and the need to be open to almost anybody who wants to make a suggestion to us and there will have to be a compromise.

Can I come back to the point of the consensus. To what extent do you think you will be able to push out the parameters of that consensus?

I think that undoubtedly *The Eleventh Hour* has contained work which has been extremely difficult to get on to British television ever before and has deserved its place there. The *Opinion* series has contained absolutely categorical views which I have never seen expressed or heard expressed in quite so forthright terms on other British media, even in print in some cases.

One is deliberately saying to people as often as one can that there are all sorts of different ways of looking at the world. Now the



interesting thing is that the consensus, or anyway the notion of 'fair does' in a national broadcasting channel with public responsibilities, evokes its own response. I've looked at the series of films that we did on Ireland in *The Eleventh Hour* called 'Silent Voices', which expressed by and large, a very Republican point of view. The immediate thing they suggest to me, which is something I've learned and felt myself, is that you really have to talk to all sorts of people if you want to find out about 'silent voices'. The man who made the documentary on Silent Voices found people who realised if they were only listening to Catholic voices in Northern Ireland they couldn't somehow be coming to grips with the realities of the political situation and the complexity and contradictions of it. So that after the silent voices on Ireland, I'm trying now to find some ways of letting Protestant voices, and Unionist and Loyalist voices, be heard on Channel Four in ways other than the conventional interview with the leader of the Unionist Party or the harangue from Ian Paisley. In the same way the opinions that have been expressed in our *Opinion* series on the Left provoke and call for other opinions on the Right. I think these are interesting and important to have as contributions to a national debate.

whether Brixton and Toxteth had been burning or not, it was necessary to let people talk about their own experience in programmes


The most delicate part of your work is when you are working on the margins of the consensus. To what extent do you find yourself under political attack?

I think there has been a criticism. I think the Channel has been perceived to be biased to the Left in the totality of its programmes. I have had opinion expressed from all sorts of different people all of whom cite sometimes one or two programmes that they have seen but not always the same programme. I do think that that criticism is to some extent justified. But I think that the fact that it should be so is itself a criticism of the conduct of broadcasting institutions over the years. They've attempted to be objective. They've attempted to be fair. They've attempted to have varied points of view: and certainly the broadcasting institutions' treatment of political debate in this country deserves infinitely more respect than the popular press does. However, because of the nature of the institutions, because of the kind of people who came together to run those institutions, to be responsible for strands of programmes in those institutions, because of the way they talk to each other and imitate each others accents and choices, you get a sameness which excludes really outspoken opinion on the fringes of the consensus. For years you got a very liberal suppression of racist opinion in this country. You equally get a suppression of the left wing point of view on nuclear issues or on the fundamental question of how society

should be organised. The BBC's withdrawal of their invitation to EP Thompson to give the Dimpleby Lecture was a symptom of this.

Some of the Left would like to claim Channel Four as their channel. It is not right to satisfy them in that, but on the other hand, it is very important that a range of points of view should be put even if some of them antagonise those who don't wish to see that that's what television can and should do, as we add to the number of channels. Those who have thought long and deeply over the last ten years and more from different points of view, about the role of media, in society, are clear in their minds that the messages that broadcasting carries are not always explicit, but are contained in coded forms in dramatic and entertainment programmes. Other people, however, are not so clear. They simply adopt the mechanistic belief that an interview on television in which Robin Day asks somebody the wrong questions or in which somebody questioned by Robin Day gives the wrong answer, may instantly and immediately affect, in a regrettable way, the balance of political opinion in the country. People don't see that that is not how television works. Therefore in considering the total function of a television channel and television as a whole one needs to take account of the totality of programmes.

Although Channel Four cannot afford to be perceived as being politically biased, I do nevertheless believe that it is the role of broadcasting, as it is the role of journalism, to give some preponderance to the voice and weight of opinion of critics in a society in order that the power of those who control the leaders of power in society, may be held in check. I think that that is the function of broadcasting as well as of written journalism. I would very much hope that all broadcasters continued to see themselves as having this properly representative function and didn't leave it all to anyone member of the family. n



Women Work Together

WAR ON WANT
Campaign against world poverty

Women worldwide are beginning to organise together to control and change their lives

WAR ON WANT gives special emphasis in its work to women's struggles by:

- publishing information
- building links
- providing solidarity
- supporting education and action projects in the UK and Third World

To continue this important work we need your help now . . .

I enclose a donation of £ _____ for War on Want's work (please fill in the name and address section below). Tick for receipt.

I am able to give regular support through a banker's order.

Send this to us, not your bank - the banker's order can be cancelled at any time by writing to your bank.

YOUR NAME _____

YOUR ADDRESS _____

TO: _____ (YOUR BANK'S NAME)

AT: _____ (BANK ADDRESS)

Please pay War on Want £ _____ every month/year starting on _____ 1983, until further notice.

Signature: _____ Account No: _____

Send to: War on Want, Room 44, Freepost, 467 Caledonian Road, London N7 9BE.

FOR OFFICE USE TO NATIONAL WESTMINSTER BANK, EALING BRANCH (0203) 0245 183/1786