



# CHURCHILL'S CRUSADE

**Sioned-Mair Richards**

When Winston Churchill came near the top of the ballot for private members' bills, there, waiting in the wings, was Mary Whitehouse with a ready-made 'Obscene Publications (Protection of Children etc) (Amendment)' bill. It aims to censor television and radio by including them in the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, thus opening them up for criminal prosecution. The bill had its second reading in January, when it was passed overwhelmingly (and included a guest appearance from Mrs Thatcher in the 'ayes' lobby). It is currently at the committee stage and will report back to the House in early April - it is likely to become law by the end of the year.

It is a tribute to Mrs Whitehouse that she has never given up. All the gains of the 60s - abortion rights, gay rights etc - which the Left took to be safely won are under attack in a climate where nothing can be said to be permanently decided. Last year there was the Powell bill implicitly attacking abortion rights, this year the Churchill bill is aiming at 'adult images' on tv and radio and, in an implicit way, gay sexuality.

The bill itself is rather a muddle with amendments being added by Churchill at every committee meeting, and other pieces being dropped, most notably the infamous laundry list which specified acts which should not be portrayed 'in actual or simulated form'. This could have meant Shakespearean classics such as *King Lear* (Gloucester's eyes being gouged out) or *Titus Andronicus* (cannibalism) being banned from tv. Or even films by animal rights activists, showing 'vicious cruelty' to animals in order to condemn it. Interestingly too, many of the acts specified would be mainly associated with gay sexuality. Heterosexual sexual intercourse and rape were not listed. This homophobic

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air can be seen in debates around the bill in which only two examples are given of the type of programme which the bill seeks to ban. They are two Derek Jarman films, *Sebastianne* and *Jubilee*. Films by an openly gay director, one of which has homoerotic overtones.

Another aspect of the debate is the implicit notion that television *per se* is a bad thing. Suspicion of this (for some) new medium comes from both the Left and the Right. The Left, because it believes that it is biased in supporting the status quo, on the Right because of the belief that it has caused or at least hastened a decline in moral standards. As Sir Nicholas Bonsor (MP for Upminster) said: 'Those of us whose families are not yet grown up do not need to watch television for long to know that there is a constant stream of filthy language and of abuse of television freedom whereby obscene and filthy images are put before our children daily'. He does not furnish any proof for this sweeping statement but it lies sufficiently within the public unease of what happens on our sets to be left unchallenged by many.

What sort of 'protection' is the Bill offering? Churchill is clear on this. It is not

from the casual violence of *Starsky and Hutch* or the *A-Team*, where getting hit doesn't hurt and being shot isn't painful. It is from programmes that are realistic that protection is sought. The play *Reservations*, a funny/sad drama which challenges sexual stereotyping by portraying a teenage boy trying, and failing, to measure up to the 'norm' that all boys get laid endlessly and easily all the time, is one of the examples to which exception is taken. Although this programme went out late at night there was a possibility of children waking up, coming downstairs and being traumatised by exposure to the programme, or parents might video it and then leave it around where young hands might find it.

Who are the opposition? A disparate group of people appear to be in alliance. In the House, the Thatcherite Matthew Paris was the only Tory to vote against the bill. Outside parliament there has been the predictable anti-censorship lobby, eg, the British Academy of Film and Television Awards, the British Film Institute, John Mortimer, Melvyn Bragg, Michael Winner. Opposition has been couched in the 60s language of 'freedom of speech' which

sounds curiously dated to many feminists who have seen this used as a smokescreen for pornography and the exploitation of women in the past. However there is feminist opposition to the bill, for it clearly does nothing to further the cause of women. 'Page 3' would not be included, nor the infamous 'Dial a Girl' phone lines run by *Penthouse*.

All this opposition is having some effect as can be seen by Churchill's constant changes to the bill, but will that be enough? There has been no mass opposition to the bill from the public, probably due to the worries already mentioned, ie, the unease that tv does go a bit far sometimes. So the Bill looks set to become law and what then? Will the tv companies give us 'four hour *Blue Peter*' and extend the self-censorship they've already started (one of the *Horizon* programmes on Aids has already been 'postponed'), or will they carry on until Mrs Whitehouse finds an excuse to go to court as she did over *The Romans in Britain* and *Gay News*? The outcome of that case would surely be as big a landmark as the *Lady Chatterley* case and would mark out the boundaries of popular culture until the end of the century.

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