

## Television

## Defence of the realm

IF further proof were needed that the British establishment is very cool to the idea of Europe, it came last week in the House of Lords report on international television. In answer to the European Commission's proposal to remove some of the restrictions on the flow of television across international barriers, the Select Committee on the European Communities responded with a disdain that can only keep the barriers up.

Not that the lords object to the objectives behind the European Economic Community's green paper of May 1984: *Television Without Frontiers*. Those are unimpeachable: to create a common market in television programmes and to create a sense of European identity. Nor would the subcommittee on energy and technology which took evidence for the report and included Lord Swann (former chairman of the British Broadcasting Corporation) and Lord Zuckerman wish to be seen to oppose the principle of free flow of information, still less to be trying to stop the advance of technology. The report recognizes the inevitable: broadband cable networks and direct-to-home satellite broadcasting will eventually blanket Europe. But the report's conclusions boil down to delaying tactics — not now, not here, not that way.

In fact, the Commission's own proposals to which the lords were objecting are quite modest: that members of the European Community countries come to an agreement on some common advertising standards (to remove such absurdities and barriers to television exchange as the ban on petfood advertising in Italy and on contact lens commercials in Britain). They would also impose a quite relaxed limit on the total amount of programming time (20 per cent) that might, within the Community, be devoted to advertising. They also proposed a possible way through the copyright thicket. As copyright agreements are bound by national borders, it is nightmarish for writers, producers, musicians to try to negotiate the rights for their programmes to be shown in another country or, in the case of Britain, on the mainland of Europe at all. US experience suggests that the new approach to the problem can only come through blanket licensing arrangements; the days of negotiating for each individual transaction disappeared with the arrival of the audio and video tape.

The lords committee, however, firmly rejected every proposal. Rejected in turn were: restricting television advertising time (that could inhibit new kinds of advertising channels); adopting a blanket copyright procedure (that would deprive copyright holders of their freedom). The

lords even rejected as unacceptable or unworkable two things the green paper did not propose: a total ban on alcohol advertising and a statutory right to reply for aggrieved parties. In sum, they found the Community the wrong body to regulate and said, contradictorily, that its proposed regulations were both premature and unnecessary as "viewers' freedom to choose will inevitably take the place of regulation".

The committee's strongest point was to argue that the Community is too small (even with 12 members) to adopt such regulations. If the new television environment has satellite signals disregarding all national boundaries, certainly wafting all across Europe, any code that ignores Austria, Norway and Switzerland will not mean very much.

In its confident nationalism, the lords' report sounds remarkably similar to the view of the BBC, the Independent Broadcasting Authority and the European

Broadcasting Union. It has fallen victim to the besetting European sin of thinking that in really vital areas (telecommunications procurement is another) national is best — particularly in broadcasting.

But the report, with the notable exception of its evidence, (one of the best summaries available of the hard-to-get information on the status of cable and satellite television in Europe) smacks of Little Englander thinking. The new standards would be minimum, not mandatory. If Britain wanted to restrict its own broadcast television to seven minutes an hour, it could still do so.

British broadcasting is probably the best in the world and regulation of the domestic product can keep it that way. But outsiders' television is crowding in. The Community's proposals are a step toward accepting that fact, and the even more uncomfortable one that if Europe is to become a real community, television programmes should be as free to travel as are workers.

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*Television Without Frontiers* (HL 43). House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities: 4th Report 1985 – 86 HMSO, £12.

## UK public spending

## No pre-election sweetener

HOPES that the restraints on British research and education spending might be relaxed with the approach of the next general election (due no later than mid-1988) were dashed last week, with the publication of the government's estimates for public spending in the next three years (to April 1989).

The cash value of the science budget, mostly spent by the research councils, estimated at £585 million in the current year and due to rise by £15 million in real terms in the next year, will reach a total of £650 million in 1988–89, an increase that will be eaten away by an inflation rate of 3.5 per cent a year. The cash value of the government subvention of the universities over the same period similarly increases by just 10 per cent.

In spite of the pressures of the past few years, the British system of higher education is not yet actually shrinking, but has stabilized at a total of 484,000 students. Within this total, a decline in university student numbers of roughly 5 per cent (to a total of 256,000) has been offset by the steady growth of the polytechnic system. The government's white paper says that the "participation rate" (the proportion of the annual age group entering higher education) has risen to 14 per cent and will continue to increase for the remainder of the decade.

On research, the government says that its aim is "to maintain and enhance the strength and quality of the science base". The document says the government be-

lieves there is further scope for "greater concentration and selectivity", with more emphasis on value for money. The document includes a number of examples of British inventions that have been commercialized successfully, including the synthetic pyrethroids and the cephalosporins. The details of how funds will be distributed among the research councils will be settled, year by year, by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils.

Meanwhile, it seems plain that the squeeze on research will continue in those departments of state that have it within their control. Last year's decision by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) to cut back on research is the chief reason why agricultural research has been forced to continue cutting back on the work at its institutes; last week's document makes it plain that there will be no reprieve, for total spending is to be reduced to £90 million three years from now from the present £95 million, inflation notwithstanding.

Even defence research, the British government's chief outlet for research money in the past, will not be immune. Last week's statement shows that defence research and development spending will have fallen from 13.4 per cent of the total in 1979–80 to 12.8 per cent in the current year (when total UK defence spending is estimated at £18,222 million). □

*The Government's Expenditure Plans 1986–87 to 1988–89* (House of Commons 9702–1 & II, HMSO, Vol. I £4.80, Vol. II £20.)