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A Platform for Persuaders

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A recent Open Door television programme gave the Human Rights Society the chance to present its case. Francis Bennion here demonstrates that the programme was not at all open in its approach. If the proposal for the fourth TV channel to become an open forum for various opinion groups is implemented, it will be necessary to examine carefully what methods of persuasion are acceptable.

When dogma dies opinions flourish. They will flourish more luxuriantly if the Government's recently announced plan for the fourth TV channel is implemented. The channel will be an open forum through which opinion groups can present their case to the public without editorial interference. The proposal follows the success of the BBC's Open Door programmes, run on the open forum basis for the past seven years.

The liberal instinct that this development is a good thing was reinforced by the prompt response of anti-libertarians. *The Times* quickly provided Ms Whitehouse with a platform for the expression of her fears about the dangers to the public of allowing untrammelled opinions to fly around the airways. The settled state of our institutions will, she feels (no doubt rightly), be still further disturbed. That is not a ground to trouble readers of this journal, but there is another reason for scrutinising the proposal with some care. A recent Open Door programme provides an example. There is much justified anxiety nowadays about human rights. When in May a body calling itself the Human Rights Society was billed to present an Open Door programme it seemed worth watching. The programme turned out to be a one-sided treatment of the question of legalising voluntary euthanasia. .

Is the right of a person who suffers painful and incurable disease to terminate his or her life to be numbered among the human rights we are nowadays anxious to protect? If not, should it be? Strangely, these questions were not discussed in the euthanasia programme presented by the Human Rights Society; indeed they were not even mentioned.

Instead it emerged that what the Society considers a "human right" is something rather different from the right to choose euthanasia; in fact the direct opposite. It is expressed in two of the Society's five aims:

"To ensure that the dignity and worth of the human person are respected, by the general acceptance of human rights and responsibilities.

"To defend in particular the right to life of all, including the sick, the handicapped and the aged."

To refute a man it may be necessary to misrepresent him. To refute advocates of voluntary euthanasia it may be necessary to pretend that in some way they deny or threaten people's *right to life*. The necessity arises from the fact that without such misrepresentation the argument in favour of allowing voluntary euthanasia with adequate safeguards is irrefutable.

The Human Rights Society's Open Door programme was largely taken up with shots of terminal patients being lovingly taken care of at a home known as St Joseph's Hospice. I have no doubt the love displayed was sincere. The voice over stressed that the quality of care at St Joseph's is greatly superior to that provided by the various NHS hospitals from which the patients had but recently been rescued by members of the Human Rights Society. It was not mentioned (though subsequent enquiry confirmed the fact) that St Joseph's Hospice is a Roman Catholic institution.

An interview with a Conservative Member of Parliament followed. Gravely and compassionately he told us that only God had the right to take away human life. It was not mentioned that this gentleman was of the Roman Catholic faith, though his name was given as Norman St John Stevas. Again, there was no suggestion that any other point of view might be valid-or even that any other point of view existed.

The programme was one-sided also on the question of enabling (through advanced medical techniques) grossly defective babies to survive their birth and grow to maturity. There were shots of a dozen such children enduring life together in a single dormitory. Each had a different deformity; all were severely damaged. Devoted people tended them, but the disquieting side of the matter was not referred to. It is depressing in the extreme for a growing child to find itself grossly deformed and compelled to exist in an institution where the other child inmates are grossly deformed too. Yet we know there are severe problems in rearing such children in the bosom of their own family. The strains are enormous, and frequently cause emotional disorder among the healthy members of the family. Marriages break up in consequence. These facts were not mentioned or even hinted at in the Human Rights Society programme. The one-sided emphasis was on preserving life at all costs.

When challenged later about the programme's lack of balance, the Society defended itself by say-

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.....-ing that it was intended as an answer to an earlier Open Door programme in which the Voluntary Euthanasia Society had presented the contrary viewpoint. The defence does not meet the objection, for there must be many people who missed the earlier programme and are unaware of the beliefs or even the existence of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. Why did not the Human Rights Society mention this vital fact in their own programme?

Why indeed did the Human Rights Society adopt that name at all? Here we come to the hub of the question. No doubt the founders and members of the Human Rights Society are sincere, well-meaning people. Many doubtless believe in their cause with burning zeal and yearn to persuade others to support it. Herein lies the danger. If a tendentious, misleading title will help to attract support it seems a small price to pay. What is truth beside the sufferings of terminal patients and spina bifida children? The end justifies the means.

This line is taken by many (though not all) of those with a cause to promote, whom we may call the persuaders. Do not admit there is another side to the question. Distort the views of your opponents. Play down their arguments. If necessary falsify the facts, or at least select them judiciously. This is propaganda and in a propaganda war truth is a necessary casualty.

We all of course do this sort of thing, to a greater or less extent, in aid of our pet causes. If we are in politics we do it constantly, for such is the stuff of politics. But we may question whether that is a justification for turning over the country's fourth TV channel as a free platform for the persuaders (it is not suggested that groups should be asked to pay for their privilege). Are there not enough causes, and is there not far too much doubtful propaganda already?

My own answer is that the project should go forward, but we should do our best to rescue the truth. Does this require the imposition of censorship? Certainly not. What it means is that in preparing their programmes groups should be exhorted to be fair and truthful. If they do not present the other side's arguments they should at least acknowledge their existence. Perhaps there should be a body for this purpose analogous to the Press Council. Such a body could investigate complaints and pronounce judgement upon them. Like the Press Council, it should be totally lacking in any power to punish or ban.

Vance Packard wrote a successful book some years ago called *The Hidden Persuaders*. It is as well that the persuaders should not be hidden, but encouraged to come into the open and state their case. So far as it can however, society needs to ensure that broadcast opinions, no less than consumer goods, pass the trade descriptions test.