

Should Debates be Broadcast ?

What Does "Controversial" Mean?



THE two words "controversial" and "propaganda" led to an imposing deputation waiting upon the Postmaster-General last week, seeking either definition or an amelioration of the regulations which operate, they claim, to unduly limit the subjects which may be dealt with in broadcast debates.

In introducing the deputation, Mr. E. J. Howard, M.P. for Christchurch South, said that the bodies represented included the Canterbury Broadcasting Debates Committee, the Canterbury College Dialectic Society, the Victoria College Debating Society, No More War Movement, W.C.T.U., League of Nations Union, Y.M.C.A., Pacific Relations Group, the National Peace Coun-

cil, and W.E.A. Their complaint was that too strict a definition was placed on the word "propaganda."

Mr. E. K. Cook, representing the Canterbury Broadcasting Debates Committee and the Canterbury College Dialectic Society, said that there were 1000 students at Canterbury College and 900 at Victoria College, and all were keenly interested in the subjects to be broadcasted. Whenever they had approached the Broadcasting Company they had had difficulty of the interpretation of "propaganda of a controversial nature." His society had endeavoured to arrange debates with the W.E.A. on educational and vital topics in economics and politics, and had been excluded from broadcasting them. In these debates both sides of the subject would be placed before the audiences and no harm could be done. If the word "controversial" was interpreted as it was at present it would exclude practically all educational subjects.

In Great Britain debates were a regular feature of the broadcasting services. It was hoped that, if the debates were contrary to the present regulations, the regulations would be amended.

Mrs. E. Maslem, secretary of the Wellington Centre of the W.E.A., said that the debates would be most informative to the general public. She gave an outline of the work that was being done in England.

Mr. H. F. von Haast, representing the Pacific Relations Group, said he had heard a broadcast debate in England between Sir Ernest Benn and Mr. J. Maxton on Socialism, and it had been most informative.

The Word "Controversial."

MR. H. R. BANNISTER, representing the Victoria College Debating Society, said that under the present interpretation of the regulations it was practically impossible to choose a subject that was of public interest. It was possible to so stretch the meaning of the word "controversial" so as to include practically every topic. He took it that the regulations really aimed at preventing any society or person putting over the air propaganda which would be subversive of the "peace and order of the Government of the Dominion," but in a debate both sides would be strongly put. Victoria College had endeavoured to arrange a debate with Auckland, but the arrangements fell through because the subject had been vetoed.

Mr. Donald: "What was the subject?"

Mr. Bannister: "The Hire-purchasing System." A subject like "Is Democracy a Failure?" would be highly controversial, but it would be discussed from all angles. His society would be very reluctant to offend the susceptibilities of listeners.

Regulations Under Review.

IN reply, the Minister said that the contentions made by the deputation were to a certain extent news to him,



2YA listeners will welcome the opportunity of again hearing Mr. Rex Harrison (baritone), well known throughout New Zealand and Australia as a performer on the concert platform and before the microphone. When in Sydney he was one of the most popular of broadcasting artists, and in an open competition he won first prize. His voice is a pure baritone, his enunciation is perfect, and he has thoroughly mastered microphone technique.

Mr. Harrison has a large repertoire. His recital on Friday evening will include two songs from Amy Woodforde-Finden's "Indian Love Lyrics"—"The Temple Bells" and "Less Than the Dust." He will also sing "Invictus" and "Nelson's Gone A'Sailing," to both of which there will be an orchestral accompaniment.

He could understand the position of the Broadcasting Company, which was a private company, and which would try and keep within the regulations. It was possible that it might shelter behind the Government, which was a good stick to lean upon. He could not give them an answer immediately, but would consult with his officers and give them a reply within the next few days. He would like himself to hear some of the subjects mentioned this morning discussed.

"THE new broadcasting regulations are under review," continued Mr. Donald, "and we hope to have them out, not before the end of this session, but probably by the time next session comes round. You are all aware that it has been suggested that we are to have alterations in broadcasting next year. A good deal of money has been

required for earthquake relief, and the department may have to moderate the scheme, but there will be an alteration in the broadcasting services from the beginning of next year. We certainly want to make the service as pleasant as possible for listeners, and at the same time educational, so that if the majority of the subjects mentioned can go over the air, it will be a good thing for the general public. The whole matter will receive the consideration it deserves."

What Britain Does With Controversial Matter.

FOLLOWING is the official summary of the B.B.C.'s present powers and practice in regard to controversy:—

"Beginning in 1923, the B.B.C. made repeated attempts to secure authority to introduce controversial subjects. But the rule against controversy was maintained both under the company and for the first year of the corporation. During the regime of the company, the Post Office exercised an over-riding censorship of subject and material. Arising out of the recommendations of the Crawford Committee on broadcasting, the Government, in licensing the corporation at the end of 1926, decided to transfer censorship functions from the Post Office to the corporation for an experimental period. But the prohibition of political, industrial, and religious controversy was to be maintained. Apparently the intention of the Government was to test the discretion of the new authority. Six months was the duration of the experimental period originally contemplated. This, however, was extended to fourteen months. Meanwhile the B.B.C. lost no opportunity of emphasising the view that controversial matter should be admitted. Some debates were organised, but the limitations necessarily imposed irritated both the speakers and the listening public. The situation became acute when a series of "debates and counter-debates," organised in co-operation with King Edward's Hospital Fund for London, had to be abandoned before completion. There followed a period of violent Press attacks, most of which were directed unfairly against the B.B.C. These attacks subsided when it became generally realised that the B.B.C. did not agree with the policy of restriction which it was reluctantly applying. It should be noted, however, that the violence of the Press discussion was not discovered to reflect any widespread or deep interest in the subject. On the contrary, the general body of listeners was apathetic.

Restrictions Removed.

LATE in February, 1928, the Government reconsidered the position and decided to remove the restrictions. On March 5 the Prime Minister gave the following reply to a question from Captain Ian Fraser, M.P.:—

"The Government have reviewed the decision taken at the time of the constitution of the British Broadcasting



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