

18th July 2001

Sir,

Freedom of Speech

If a work of fiction depicted a Britain of the near future in which the Government could by order make it a criminal offence for two people to discuss a named topic on the grounds that their discussion of it might endanger national security, the reader might be inclined to scoff at such an absurdity.

But that is exactly the power that the present Government is now seeking to take under clause 2 of the Export Control Bill now under consideration by Parliament.

The Bill is founded in good intentions - to prevent Iraq from acquiring biological weapons, or Pinochet's Chile from acquiring instruments of torture. But it goes beyond the export of goods to impose control on technology, and it goes beyond export to control all communication or publication of technology, even wholly within Britain; and it defines technology to mean any information about any activity at all.

The Bill would confer on the Government an enormously wide power to suppress discussion or publication over a huge range of topics for a very wide range of purposes. The teaching of whole areas of physics, chemistry and medicine would be covered (all useful in making weapons of mass destruction). No government would of course suppress the teaching of virology, for example; but that is why it seems absurd that this Government should seek such a power.

It is an irony for such a Bill to be certified to be compatible with the Human Rights Convention by

the Secretary of State, Patricia Hewitt, a former
General Secretary of Liberty.

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